

Prologue: Bittersweet Dreams

Hermione knew she was dreaming. The sun was shining brightly and there was a warm summer breeze as she stood by the fence surrounding her house. That was how she knew she was dreaming--her house, along with her family, had been destroyed by Death Eaters months ago. And yet, there before her was her beautiful, two-story home. The grass was as lush and green as ever, and the white picket fence was as pristine as the day before it was burned to cinders. A vision of the past danced mockingly before her eyes--the house aflame, the yard barren, her family's blood spattered on the walls...

I'm going to make it better, someone whispered in her ear. *I'm going to fix this*. She looked around but saw no one. Shrugging it off, she decided to continue on her path.

She walked up to the door, unsure of whether or not she should enter. Was this dream really a nightmare? Would she find her parents' dead bodies within? Pushing aside her hesitation, the young witch reached out grasp the doorknob, only to have the door swing open. There, wearing a yellow summer dress, was her mother. "Hermione, my girl, I was wondering when you would come home. Come along then, we're just getting ready for dinner!"

I've done it, Hermione! I've done it--he's gone for good. Now, I'll make everyone safe and I'll bring you back, the hauntingly familiar voice said. Hermione ignored it, seeing no one but her mother.

Stepping over the threshold, Hermione felt her heart ease. Everything looked as it had the last time she was home, from the pictures on the wall to those hideous lamps on the end tables in the family room. Hermione followed her mother to the kitchen and was surprised to see her entire family--all of whom were dead.

This is for you, Hermione, I hope you know that. The voice again. It was so familiar... did any of the others hear it? Best to ignore the voice, she felt, since no one else seemed to take notice. Hermione looked around the room, enjoying the chance to simply look at those who had left her behind.

There was her Uncle Jack, a quirky man with a penchant for sweets--he was forever slipping her all sorts of candies when her parents weren't looking--who had died when she was six. Her Great Aunt Josephine, a stern woman with a crude sense of humor when she drank too much wine, had died when Hermione was four. There were her grandparents, engaged in a heated debate about whether Charles Dickens or Jane Austen was the better author, who had all died together in a car accident when she was five.

Her mother, now chatting with, or rather at, her father, sat at the table as if their home had never been attacked by Death Eaters and they had never been tortured to death. Under the table, waiting for scraps, was her beloved puppy Horace, another victim of a car accident a scant few days before her Uncle Jack died. Next to him Crookshanks played with a stuffed mouse, batting it back and forth as though he hadn't perished with her parents. The only thing missing was...

"Mione!" A voice squealed. Turning, Hermione opened her arms to embrace the eleven year old girl hurtling towards her. "I was wondering when you would get here! What took you so long?"

"I was a bit busy, Harmony, but I'm home now." Hermione smiled at her younger sister, holding her tightly. She had never realized how much she missed her family until she found herself surrounded by all the things she had long since lost.

I know it's not very pleasant, but I must do this. You understand, don't you? Of course you do. You're the only one who understands me.

It wasn't long before she was pulled to the table and served dinner. The family sat, ate, and laughed together. Time seemed to fly by as they shared their merriment and told embarrassing stories about each other. Hermione even told a few tales about Fred and George Weasley's antics at Hogwarts and some of their products. Hermione quickly decided this was the best dream ever--there was no Voldemort, no Death Eaters. There was peace and happiness. The only thing missing, Hermione thought, was Harry and Ron.

I'm almost done, Hermione. Soon I'll have control, then I can make everything better.

Hermione had been explaining how she had botched the Polyjuice Potion and turned herself into a cat when a knock came at the door. Uncle Jack stood, "I'll get it, but don't go on until I get back!"

"Who could be here?" Great Aunt Josephine asked. "There's no one left, I thought." Hermione's mother shrugged as her Uncle Jack walked back into the room, a puzzled look on his face. Behind him were three people Hermione thought she'd never see again, and two people she thought she'd never meet.

Professor Albus Dumbledore was resplendent in his violet robes, with Sirius Black and Remus Lupin, who sacrificed his life for Tonks and their unborn twins while on the hunt for Horcruxes, to his left. On his right...on his right stood a man with messy black hair and brown eyes, and a woman with long red hair and emerald eyes. They could only be the Potters.

"Oh! I...uh...hello," she said, unsure of what to do. Her happy dream was quickly twisting into something very strange.

Professor Dumbledore chuckled. "Hello, Miss Granger. I believe you know Sirius and Remus. As I'm sure you've guessed, the others are Lily and James Potter," Hermione nodded in greeting. "It is a shame we must meet again so soon, but I'm afraid I need your help."

Hermione immediately stood, always ready to offer aid. "What do you need me to do, sir? I'll help however I can, of course."

"She doesn't know." Harmony interrupted. "She thinks this is a dream, and no one has told her it isn't yet."

Hermione looked at her family, all of whom were blushing, and some of them were looking away. "What's going on? What haven't you told me?"

Dumbledore sighed. "There is much for us to tell you, it seems. Perhaps you should be seated? There is much to discuss." Five chairs appeared as the headmaster took a seat across from Hermione, Sirius, Remus and the Potters on either side. Warily, the young witch nodded and took her seat between her mother and Harmony. "Because I hold you in such high esteem, I will tell you

everything you wish to know, but first I would ask that you tell me what you last remember before your arrival here.”

Hermione licked her lips nervously, feeling as though she were taking a test she didn't study for. “Harry, Ron and I destroyed the last of the Horcruxes and were on our way to Voldemort when we were ambushed.” Hermione said slowly, aware for the first time that she hadn't really thought of what had happened before she came home. “I--I was hit with some sort of spell that knocked me out, and then I was here.” She waved in her hand to indicate the house.

Dumbledore nodded, mumbling softly to himself. “Well, my dear, I will be frank. You have been here for just shy of a year,” he began shocking Hermione. “Yes, time passes differently here, doesn't it? Well, much has happened in the world as you know it. You will be pleased to know that Harry and Ron were not *physically* harmed during the ambush. However, there were grave ramifications. Following the attack, your friends went,” he hesitated, “Harry went quite mad, and Ron, loyal as he is, continued to fight with Harry. A month after the attack Harry defeated Voldemort.” Dumbledore sighed heavily. “And now our story turns grim. It seems our Harry suffered too many losses. Following the defeat of Voldemort, Harry took his place as the new Dark Lord.”

“No,” she denied, shaking her head. “Harry wouldn't do that. He wouldn't, I know he wouldn't. Harry would never be like Voldemort.”

“Hermione,” Sirius whispered. “Do you know where you are?”

Her stomach twisted into knots. “I'm, I'm in some sort of Limbo. I was hit by a curse, and now I'm in an enchanted sleep maybe, or coma, or I'm--”

“Dead,” Lily Potter said sadly. “We didn't want to believe it either, when we came here. We thought we were dreaming too, and we kept thinking that our Harry was going to crawl through the door any minute. But he never came.”

“That's the way time works, here. It passes so that you don't know it, and you keep thinking that, any minute now, the person you're waiting for will come through the door. It felt like only a couple of

hours had passed before we realized Harry was getting his Hogwarts letter." James said. "You don't really perceive time here unless you look into your well--then you can see what is happening in the realm of the living."

"Well?" Hermione asked.

"Each family, or person if it's someone who is a loner, has a well that they can look into to see what is happening to their loved ones." Sirius explained. "I've been using mine to check on Harry quite often."

"We all have," James added.

Hermione stood again. "Can you take me to this well? I need to know what's going on, I need to see for myself."

Her father nodded. "I'll show you," he said quietly, standing.

"We'll all go with you," Uncle Jack said, standing along with the others.

Her father leading the way, the large group went into the garden behind the house. A well sat in the center, surrounded by daffodils. "Touch the water and think of who you want to see," her father said.

Hesitantly, Hermione reached out, touching the water and thinking of Harry. Suddenly, she found herself in the Great Hall, but it was different. Instead of the cheerful house colors, the Hogwarts mourning banners hung overhead. A storm cloud hung over Hogwarts, blocking the beautiful view normally seen from the enchanted ceiling. The tables were much the same, but the headmaster's seat was now an ornate throne.

The doors banged open as Harry entered, followed by Ron, Ginny and several bowing and stumbling Death Eaters. Harry sat on the ornate chair with Ron seated to his right, and Ginny perched on the left arm of the throne. Hermione's eyes narrowed at the sight before her--her only consolation was that Harry looked annoyed with Ginny's seating choice. With a sneer, Harry looked at the Death Eater McNair. "Bring him in." The room was silent as McNair backed out. Hermione realized suddenly that the voice she had been hearing earlier was Harry's. He must have been talking to her, telling her things, but she

hadn't recognized him. Perhaps, she reflected, when the living think of the dead, the dead can hear them.

Hermione took a moment to look at Harry. His hair was slicked back, much like Malfoy used to do. His glasses were gone, but his beautiful emerald eyes were pure black. *A spell*, she realized, *a dark spell to correct his vision*. His robes were pitch black with silver trim and billowed behind him when he walked. Ron was dressed much the same, though his dark blue robes were not as elaborate. His hair, too, was slicked back, and there was a patch over his left eye. Ginny wore a form fitting black muggle dress, her hair hanging loose over her shoulders.

The doors opened again, bringing Hermione from her thoughts. McNair came in, dragging a staggering form behind him. The slumped figure looked up, and Hermione gasped to see her former potions master, Severus Snape.

Harry smiled grimly. "Hello, Snivellus. How was your stay in the dungeons? I know you liked to skulk around there while I was a student--thought you might like to stay in a place you were familiar with while I decided what to do with you." The fallen potions master was silent, though his glare said everything he refused to say.

Harry stood, shoving Ginny off of his chair. "Leave," he commanded, and the room immediately began to empty, until only Ron and Ginny remained. Harry looked at the door in disgust. "Repulsive. They cling like leeches to anything with the least bit of power--not half a brain between the lot." He glanced over to Ginny. "Why are you still here? I said leave."

Ginny was taken aback. "I, I thought you meant--"

"My hangers-on? Yes I did. Now, why are you still here?" He hissed, eyes narrowed.

Ginny raised her head defiantly and walked to the door to leave, only to have the door hit her on her backside as she left. "You need to talk to your sister, Ron. I tolerate her actions because we dated once and because she is your family. This is my final warning. I will not tolerate her insolence any longer."

“As you wish,” Ron replied quietly, sadly.

Harry nodded once and turned back to his former professor. “I suppose I’ll offer you the courtesy of a quick death if you tell me who killed her.”

Snape sneered. “Now why would I make things easy for you, Potter?”

“Why would you make things hard for yourself? You’ve seen what I’m capable of. Tell me who killed her, and I won’t keep you alive for weeks while I play around with the new spells I’ve discovered.” Harry replied.

“You’re a disgrace, Potter,” the potions master hissed. “There’s nothing special about you, no matter what everyone thinks. It was your mother’s sacrifice that saved you from the Dark Lord time and again, and it was Miss Granger,” he spat the name, “that kept you alive throughout your Hogwarts career. For years you have taken credit for things you have not done. Oh yes, I know full well that it was Miss Granger that discovered what lay within the Chamber of Secrets, just as I know that your high marks in potions your sixth year were courtesy of *my* work. You’ve done nothing but rely on others to do what you are too lazy to do yourself.”

“Any last words?” Harry drawled, choosing to ignore his speech.

The fallen man gave him a nasty smile. “I’m sure your dearly departed Miss Granger loves what you’ve become.”

Harry’s face hardened as he made a curt gesture, his magic ripping the skin from the man’s body. “He didn’t know.” Harry said darkly, turning away. “Have someone clean this mess up.”

Ron nodded. “Do you want me to call a house elf, or--”

“No house elves.” Harry snapped then calmed himself. “Have McNair do it, he’s always trying to gain favor. Tell him to put Snape in the Entrance Hall, with my other trophies--I wouldn’t want Wormtail, Lestranger, and Voldemort to be lonely.” Harry sneered, walking towards a door off to the side of the Hall.

Ron hesitated. "Harry?"

The young wizard stopped but didn't turn. "What?"

"Nothing," Ron said, heading towards the main exit, shooting a worried look at the man his best friend had become.

Harry either didn't notice or didn't care, as he walked through the side door without so much as a backwards glance. Hermione followed, fearful of what she would see but unable to stay away. The room they entered was something like a tomb, lined with statues of angels, all of which were holding a candle. As Harry walked by, each candle lit, providing a small bit of light. Hermione gasped when she saw what lay in the center of the room.

It was her. Or rather, it was her body, resting on an altar. She was dressed in her Hogwarts robes, her prefect badge pinned just above the Gryffindor crest. Her hair was an untamed mass of curls framing her face. Tucked lovingly in her arms was her prized and oft-read copy of *Hogwarts, A History*. Surrounding her body was a glass covering, forming a protective barrier. The glass, Hermione guessed, held a powerful stasis charm to keep her body from deteriorating. Hermione shuddered. Lying peacefully under the casing, she looked like she was sleeping.

Harry sat on a small stool set beside the altar. With a wave of his hand, the glass casing vanished. He sat for a moment, just looking at her face. "I'm sorry I haven't been to visit you for a while, but I was busy. I told you I was going to secure the Ministry, but it took me longer than I thought. I'm working on some new laws now--I'm going to call them The Granger Acts." He smiled. "They protect house elves, hippogriffs, and werewolves. Soon *they* will hold more power than most purebloods."

His smile vanished. "Not very many people care for the New Order. They don't realize yet that what I'm doing is for their own good." He gave a lopsided smile. "I bet you would understand. You always understood me. You would know that everything, the laws, the trials--you would know that it's all for their own good. I need to get rid of all of Voldemort's loyal followers. Most of them are toads that hop dutifully after whoever is the Dark Lord of the Day, but some actually

followed Voldemort because they believed his ideals. It's the believers that I must exterminate. My methods are not pleasant, I know, but they will be safer for it." Harry said firmly. He smirked, a manic glint in his eyes. "Yes, you would realize there is a method to my madness."

He shifted in his seat. "Do you want to hear something amusing? Crabbe loves reading. I've got him looking through just about every book I can get to find a spell to bring back the dead." Harry looked at her dead form in such an earnest manner, she could almost imagine it was the same Harry she knew in Hogwarts. "He found a lead--there's an ancient Druidic ritual used to bind the souls of the dead to a host body. With some improvements, I'm sure I'll be able to bring you back to me."

The young Dark Lord was quiet a moment, before he tentatively reached out. His hand hovered just above her hair, but he pulled away before he actually touched her. With another wave of his hand, the shield was returned, and he set his hand lightly on the glass. "I'm sorry I didn't realize sooner," he whispered.

His eyes hardened as he stared unseeingly at the far wall. "I'll find the one who killed you, Hermione. I'll make him pay." With that, Harry turned and walked away, but Hermione was unable to follow him. As she stared at her dead body, she knew she needed to leave, knew she needed to be far away.

Suddenly, Hermione found herself stumbling away from the well, gasping for air. "That...was not Harry. That was a nightmare," she choked, trembling. She felt arms wrap around her and looked up to see her father's concerned face looking at her. He pulled her tightly to his chest, and she let herself cry as he held her.

When at last Hermione gathered herself together, she looked back at everyone. "Well," she began weakly. "That...was not what I was expecting. I--I don't understand what could make Harry become so...twisted." She said, shaking her head and drawing in a shuddering breath.

"It seems your death pushed our Harry over the edge," Lily said quietly. "A person can only handle so many losses before they snap."

First he saw young Cedric Diggory die, then Sirius, then Albus, then you.”

“He saw four people that he loved, or respected in the Diggory boy’s case, die, and he could do nothing to stop it.” James added. “It’s enough to make any man snap, and when you add in everything else...” He trailed off, shaking his head sadly.

“It hurts all of us to know what Harry has become,” Remus said. “That is why we’ve come to you for help.”

“What can I do?” Hermione asked plaintively. “I mean, I’m dead after all, and I don’t think I could bear watching...” she trailed off, glancing at the well with a touch of anxiety.

“Nothing like that, Hermione,” Sirius said. “We have a very different sort of offer. You can go back.”

“I don’t like the sound of this,” Hermione’s mother said coolly. “We just got her back, and from what your saying, you want her to leave. It was you people that put us in danger in the first place by having mere children do your work for you, knowing it would make them and their families targets. It’s your fault we’re here now instead of still living.”

The five visitors winced, but Lily stood firm. “I believe your daughter chose to attend Hogwarts and to befriend my son. She did so despite the risks. We are offering her the chance to go back and change what happened--for the betterment of everyone.”

Before her mother could reply, Hermione spoke. “Will you explain to me what you mean? I’m new around here, so I don’t know where the library is,” she joked weakly, earning a few chuckles. “I don’t know of any way to change what has happened. What exactly does this...*offer*...entail?”

“I shall explain,” the headmaster said. “The Divine Beings of this realm have come to the decision that Mr. Potter cannot be a Dark Lord--he is too powerful and he will surpass even their power if he continues.”

“How?” Hermione choked.

"You are aware that he intends to bring you back from the dead, yes?" Hermione heard the horrified gasps of her family as she nodded. "When he succeeds, and he will succeed, he will have the power to literally choose who lives and who dies. He will be a Divine Being in his own right, and since he will have the power to bring the dead back to life, unlike the other Divine Beings..." He trailed off.

"These other Divine Beings, if they can't bring people back to life, how can they send me back?" She asked.

"They do not have the ability to breathe life into a dead body, that is true. They can, however, send a spirit back in time to its original vessel." Dumbledore said. "That is what they plan to do, if you agree--send you back to a time of your choosing."

Hermione looked up, her eyes glowing with hope. "They would send me back to *any* time that I chose?"

"Well, there's more to it--it's really you who does all the work." Remus began. "We can't tell you what to do before you agree."

"And before you agree, there are some things we need to tell you." Sirius said solemnly. It was strange to see his eyes without a mischievous glint. "This isn't going to be easy, Hermione. There are a lot of rules and warnings, and not very many privileges."

I've found him, Hermione, I've found the man that killed you. Can you believe it was McNair all along? He thought that by licking my boots he would earn leniency. I have some...interesting...things planned for him, never you worry. He will regret what he did a thousand times over before I let him die. Fear gripped her and, unable to speak, she nodded for them to continue.

"The First rule is you must return to your own body--you cannot go back to a time where you did not exist, so you cannot, for example, go back so far that Voldemort had not yet created Horcruxes." Dumbledore said.

"Secondly, you won't be able to tell anyone," James began. "No one can know about what has happened here, or what happened in the future you know."

"You'll have to lie a lot about the things you know--it's going to look strange after a while when you know everything that's going to happen." Remus said.

"Yeah, and I imagine you'll be carted off to St. Mungo's for saying you come from a dark future." Sirius snorted.

"And even if you weren't considered insane, the Ministry would isolate or obliviate you so that you couldn't change anything--they're very firm about laws pertaining to time interference." Lily added.

Dumbledore chuckled. "Our dear Hermione is well versed with the Ministry's laws in regard to time travel--she used a time turner to take several classes her third year."

"And still managed to help save a condemned hippogriff and an escaped innocent convict," Sirius grinned.

The research is progressing well. The ritual involves a few sacrifices. It calls for the blood of three women to represent the fates. I'll need a Maiden, a Mother, and a Crone. I've already got a Pureblood family in mind--it turns out Theodore Nott's Grandmother is still alive, and his mother has a daughter that's about seven now. No one will miss them. Soon I'll be able to bring you back, and you will rule by my side. I want you to know it will be an equal partnership. We'll make our decisions together. Hermione shuddered, and gestured for them to continue.

"The third rule," Dumbledore continued on, "is that you must continue on with your appointed task, regardless of what happens. If a decision you make has an unhappy consequence, you are not permitted to simply give up."

Hermione nodded her understanding, suddenly feeling alone. The first and the third rules didn't seem to be very problematic, but the second...Harry couldn't know. It was his future she was changing, and he couldn't know.

"There are two warnings. The first is to be weary of where you place blame. Remember, you cannot know everything that will happen--when all does not go as you plan, it may or it may not be your fault.

Do not, my dear, place blame where it does not belong.” Dumbledore said solemnly.

“The second warning is more serious,” Remus began. “It may seem like a wonderful idea to go back as far as you can, but you must be careful--the farther back you go, the more variability you have to deal with.”

“What do you mean?” Hermione asked nervously.

“Remus means that if you back to say, your fourth year and somehow prevent Voldemort from rising, then you must concern yourself with how he may later rise, and rise he certainly will. If you choose your fifth year, however, Voldemort will have risen already, but you will still be able to save Sirius. There are many things you must consider about each of the choices you make--no choice should be made lightly, but yours, if you choose to accept, can hold dire consequences if they are not thought out properly.” The headmaster said grimly.

“This may seem to be a glorious gift, my dear, but remember this: all that glitters is not gold.” Dumbledore said, setting a comforting hand on her shoulder. “This is a grave responsibility you must undertake alone--no one here will remember anything that has happened here, so there is no one you can go to for advice. If you do this, you *will* do it alone.”

The ritual Crabbe found should work, Hermione. We'll have to make a few more changes, but soon I'll bring your soul back and put it where it belongs--in your body. You'll be with me once more, and I'll make sure you never leave me again. You're mine, Hermione, and I'll never let you go.

Hermione shuddered. “I’ll do it,” she said quickly, knowing they were running out of time. “Just tell me what to do, and I’ll do it.”

“Hermione,” her mother began, “are you sure you--”

“He’s going to bring me back soon. We’re running out of time.” She looked into Dumbledore’s eyes. “Tell me, please.”

"We must speak quickly then--there is more for you to know. We cannot help you, as you know," he said, guiding her towards the well. "We cannot give you a key that will open a vault full of gold for you, we cannot give you power beyond imagination. We can tell you this: you were chosen for a reason, because you are the only one who can do this. Have faith in yourself, Hermione. There is one more thing I can tell you, my dear. I can tell you that *all* witches and wizards have the ability to perform wandless magic, even you. You must unlock the secrets yourself, I can't tell you that."

"Hermione," her Great Aunt Josephine called. "On the far side of your attic, below the oval window there is a loose floorboard--in the cubby hole is my treasure box from when I was younger. There's nothing of monetary value, and there's nothing magical, but I'd rather you have it. It will help you know this is not a dream."

Hermione started when she felt Lily's hand on her shoulder. "You will take care of my Harry, won't you?"

The young witch nodded. "I'll do my best," she said quietly.

Lily smiled. "You'll do wonderfully."

It's time, Hermione. It's time for you to come home to me.

She swayed dangerously as she heard a distant chanting in a language she didn't understand. "I-I think it's begun," she said weakly, feeling dizzy. The chanting was growing louder and louder, making it harder and harder to concentrate. She was dimly aware of Sirius and Remus lifting her up so that she stood on the edge of the well. Everything was running together--there was chanting, her family was murmuring, Horace was barking--nothing was clear.

"Concentrate, Hermione. You need to think of the time you wish to return to and jump into the well."

"I--what? I can't--" She felt like she was being pulled in several directions all at once. Her head ached from all of the noise, the only thing she could make out was Horace barking. Hermione felt hands on her back and suddenly found herself falling forward. She rushed towards the dark, Horace's bark still ringing in her ears.

A/N: Wow, I wasn't expecting it to be this long! Fair warning, I can't promise a consistent length for future chapters, nor can I provide a schedule for updates--I have a very busy college life.

I would like to say that I am a first time author, so any advice you can provide would be great, be it about spelling, grammar, whether or not the story was rushed or choppy, etc. I do not have a Beta, so I freely admit any mistakes you find are because I didn't catch them. Also, I have to give credit where credit is due--this story was inspired in part by **fashiZzlism's**, *A Second Chance*. Great story.

Well, thank you for reading, and I ask that you please review.

Cheers,

Madm05

Chapter One: Repercussions

Hermione pulled a pillow over her head, trying to block out Horace's continuous barking. Horace's barking! Hermione shot out of bed, tumbling over the blankets and landing hard on the floor. She looked around the room, exhilarated and terrified at the same time. Part of her wanted desperately to believe her dream wasn't just a dream, that it was too real to be a fantasy, but the logical part of her mind said that such flights of fancy were impossible.

Uncle Jack suddenly burst through the door, looking frantically around, relief flooding his face when he saw Hermione was unharmed. "Hey, kiddo, you gave me quite a scare. What are you doing on the floor?"

"I--" Uncle Jack was alive! Had he ever really died, or was that a dream, too? "I had a nightmare. I died." It wasn't a complete lie--her dream definitely had some aspects of a nightmare, and she had been dead.

Uncle Jack lifted her into his arms and carried her downstairs to the kitchen, where Harmony was sitting in her highchair, waiting to be fed. "Don't worry, it was just a dream. Here, blueberry pancakes--they can fix anything, if you have enough syrup to go with them," he said, covering her two pancakes with more syrup than was needed. "You're parents have left for work today, and since I'm staying for the week, you won't have a sitter. I do have an errand to run, if you think you can handle watching the house for an hour."

Hermione quirked an eyebrow. "You're not afraid I'll burn the house down or smother my sister with a pillow?"

Uncle Jack laughed merrily. "Hermione, we both know that you're a responsible girl, you're more responsible than me, really, and I know how much you love your sister," he said, reaching over to give Harmony a spoonful of baby food. Harmony had other ideas, however, and grabbed the food and threw it at him. "Though I am in awe of your ability to do so as consistently as you do," he said, some sort of orange sauce dripping down his face.

Hermione giggled. "You can do what you need to. I have some reading I'd like to do, but Horace will let me know if something happens, won't you, Horace?" She said, scratching the energetic puppy behind his ears.

"Great. I'll buy you something sweet to snack on--as a thank you. You won't tell your parents, right?" He asked, grinning.

"It will be our little secret," she laughed.

Breakfast continued with much laughter, and a great deal of orange baby food on the floor, highchair, and Uncle Jack. Harmony finally began to eat when a smug Hermione decided to feed her some banana-flavored baby food.

A short while later, as Uncle Jack was pulling out of the drive, Hermione put Harmony in her playpen and dashed upstairs and down to the end of the hallway. She jumped up and grabbed the string hanging from above. With a firm yank, she pulled open the door and pulled the stairs down. Hesitating for a moment, Hermione began to climb steadily up the ladder.

Making her way towards the window, Hermione covered her mouth to keep out the dust. She pushed several boxes out of her way before she knelt before the large oval window. Hermione paused. Would she really find Great Aunt Josephine's treasure box? Her dream was so strange--almost too strange to be reality. She scoffed. It was ridiculous, really, she couldn't possibly be a witch. But this would set her mind at rest. She would look for a loose floorboard and not find it, and she would go back to living her life, ignoring her very long, very detailed, very disturbing dream.

She was taken by surprise when she found a board that was loose. Swallowing and slowly lifting the board, Hermione peeked at what lay beneath. In the hole sat a dust-covered box. Without thinking, she grabbed the box, replaced the floorboard, and scrambled out of the attic and down the stairs. Setting the box safely on the ground, she began to push the stairs back up. Finding herself too short, she rushed to the kitchen and grabbed a broom to push the door the rest of the way closed.

Her task finished, Hermione carried the box back to her room--being sure to leave the door open in case Harmony needed her--and wiped the dust from the surface. Slowly, she lifted the lid and peered inside. Just as she was told, the box held nothing of value--there was what looked to be a quartz stone, a few marbles, and a newspaper clipping about her Great Aunt winning a contest for her school. What caught Hermione's eyes was a small Celtic Cross necklace.

Slipping the cord over her neck, Hermione quickly checked on Harmony before going back to her room and grabbing her empty, and until that moment useless, journal. Now that she knew that it was real, that it wasn't just a vivid dream, there was much she had to do. She glanced at the clock. Horace was hit by a car just a little after eleven in the morning. It was a quarter until eleven now, so as long as he was inside, he would be safe.

Hermione smiled. If Horace lived, then everything would work out wonderfully. Uncle Jack had been killed when a few burglars had broken in and found him sleeping on the sofa with the television on during his annual visit. He hadn't survived, but now Horace would be alive. Horace would be able to alert her family when the house was broken into, and no one would die.

Turning back to her journal, Hermione opened the leather cover. She flipped to the back of the second page and began to list things to consider changing, and the pros and cons of each possible choice. There was little she could do while she was in the muggle world other than plan. She couldn't even apparate anywhere, for fear of being seen. Hermione continued to write her list, periodically checking on Harmony until Uncle Jack came back at half past eleven. Hermione smiled as she scratched Horace behind his ears and continued on with her lists.

After finishing her lists, she flipped to the last page of her journal and turned the book upside down, and proceeded to the second page. Once there, she began to write down every detail she could remember of Harry having used wandless magic--both what he told her from his time before Hogwarts and, she shuddered, what she had seen when she had been dead. She desperately wished she could do magic, but without a wand and without the knowledge to do wandless

magic, there was really no way to prevent anyone from getting into her journal. She had to resort to trickery.

The next few days progressed in much the same manner as Hermione carefully planned possible ways to rescue Sirius, save Professor Dumbledore, and destroy the Horcruxes. Occasionally she would wonder what Harry was doing at that moment, but she would always draw herself back to her task. She had to plan carefully--there were far too many risks involved.

While her days were spent planning and her nights were haunted by Dark Harry, her evenings were spent covertly enjoying time with her parents. *You never know what you have until it's gone*, she thought, remembering the old phrase. It could not have been more true. She couldn't be obvious--she couldn't leap randomly into their arms and squeal "You're alive!" No, that would lead to questions, or it could make them pay closer attention to her actions. And so, with much difficulty, the young witch restrained herself, though if her parents noticed that she was much more affectionate than she had ever been in her life, they said nothing.

On the sixth night, the night the thieves were to break into her house, she sat comfortably in her father's lap, sipping the hot cocoa she had wheedled out of her mother, and listening to Uncle Jack read her favorite non-magical novel--*The Phantom of the Opera* by Gaston Leroux. Not that she would ever admit to anyone that her favorite book was a romance novel of sorts. Privately Hermione doubted anyone would believe she would read anything that wasn't academic anyways.

She was nervous about what was to come that night, but there was little she could do, really--she certainly couldn't tell her family that they were going to be robbed that night without arising suspicion. She had to trust that Horace would alert her family so that they could properly defend themselves, and that was all that could be done, with her limited resources.

Eight O'clock came all too soon, and she was sent to bed. That, she decided was the worst thing she had encountered during her mission--bedtime. It was worse that she was mentally eighteen years old and

was used to staying up until all hours of the morning reading. The fact that tonight her entire family was going to be in danger from two thieves who had killed Uncle Jack in her first life wasn't helping matters.

Anxious and unable to sleep, she began to focus on the idea of wandless magic. Obviously it surfaced when a magical child was in distress or emotions were running high. The first thought was of little help, as she didn't intend to put herself in mortal danger any time soon, but the second was worth considering. Which emotions caused wandless magic? Were emotions the only trigger she could utilize? She recalled the Dark Harry had been in total control of his emotions...but had he really been?

The more she thought about it, the less sure she was on the matter. Harry had been in control, there was no denying that, but his emotions were...not. He had been easily angered, but could go from a cold blooded murderer to the sweet Harry she had known in first year. How she wished she could have seen his eyes! If she could only have looked into his emerald eyes, she would have known what he was and wasn't feeling when he used wandless magic.

With a frustrated sigh, she pulled her robe tighter around her, tucked her journal safely in her pocket, and began to pace. Emotions, they were the key, but what was it about them that allowed a magical person to use magic without a way to concentrate their energy? Emotions were often used in magic, but it was more to influence how powerful the spell was. The cast a powerful cheering charm, the caster had to think of something that cheered them up, thus adding their cheerfulness to the spell. There were even parallels with the Dark Arts. For many dark spells, the caster must be angry, vengeful, or hateful, and they must *want* to cause pain and suffering. For the Dark Arts, it was negative emotions mixed with malicious desire or intent that powered them. But where was the link?

Emotions also influenced how a transfiguration spell turned out. She recalled in the beginning of second year how she remembered feeling a little queasy at making buttons turn into beetles, and her buttons had turned into the ugliest bugs she had ever seen in her life. When she had tried again but had been in a better mood, the beetles

weren't nearly as gross, and were actually kind of cute looking. Not that she would ever admit that she thought a bug of any kind was cute. Again, where was the link?

Emotions, she concluded, influenced the type, power, and result of a spell cast, be it a dark spell, a charm, or a transfiguration spell. She understood that. But where was the focus? Normally, a wand was used to focus magic, to channel it into a form that could be used. With wandless magic, there was no such conductor. Perhaps the channel was a hand motion? The Dark Harry had used hand motions...but she could recall instances when *she* had used wandless magic when she was four, and she never moved her hands. No, she had called her books to her--

A sudden bark from Horace snapped her out of her thoughts. She heard Horace begin to growl and bark his warning before her parents began to stir. Suddenly Harmony began to cry, angry at being woken. Hermione dashed out of her room and met her parents in the hall. The six year old automatically went into her sister's room to quiet her while her mother and father nodded in approval and rushed downstairs.

"Hush, Harmony," Hermione whispered soothingly as she held her sister. "Don't cry, sissy Mione will take care of you." A crash mixed with the sound of Horace's barking down below, and Hermione thought she heard someone swear. The commotion was unbearable, but Hermione stayed away. She hated feeling useless, but she refused to risk her sister's life, and Harmony's cries could draw unwanted attention.

Time seemed to slow, and each sound became more prominent. Something glass shattered. Something wooden snapped. Someone cried out in pain. Something, or someone, hit the wall. A dog yelped. Every sound was so clear. A woman screamed in fear and horror. A gunshot. Then another and another. Then there was silence.

Hermione swallowed thickly. She knew her parents didn't have any guns in the house. The silence soon became unbearable. Should she go downstairs? She couldn't leave Harmony unprotected...what could she do? Still holding and fearing for Harmony, Hermione shifted the

baby in her arms and her own body so that if there was danger, Harmony would still be protected. Taking a deep breath, she stepped tentatively down the stairs, dreading what she would see. It was worse than she had imagined. It certainly hadn't sounded like there was as much destruction as she could see.

She briefly considered taking Harmony back upstairs, but she couldn't. She couldn't take the risk that someone may be dying, couldn't take the risk that leaving Harmony behind would leave her unprotected. Drawing in a deep breath and holding Harmony tight against her, and covering her sister's eyes, she stepped forward.

Uncle Jack had been thrown against the wall, head first. She only knew the bloody body on the floor was her uncle because he was the only one in her family brave enough to wear stripes and polka dots to bed. Choking back a sob she continued to survey the damage. A strange man was laying facedown on the floor, one of her mother's kitchen knives in his back. Her stomach churned, but she pressed on. She had seen worse when she was helping Harry destroy Horcruxes.

Turning the corner, she let out a small cry, seeing her mother staring lifelessly at her. There was a small trail of blood from her nose, and her neck was turned at an odd angle--it was probably broken. Tears streaming down her face, Hermione forced herself to keep looking, to keep hoping that her father was still alive.

The second burglar was slumped against the far wall. It looked like her father had hit him in the head with something, and his left arm was broken, the gun he had fired still in his unmoving hand. Her breath caught when she saw her father laying a few feet away. There was a bullet hole in his shoulder, and two more in his chest. There was no chance of survival.

It's my fault. The thought knocked her to her knees. The ache in her heart and the weight of guilt on her shoulders blocked out everything else. She never felt the physical pain of the shattered glass she had landed on digging into her legs and shredding her robe. Harmony squirmed, trying to push Hermione's hand away from her eyes, but Hermione held her close.

Feeling the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end she looked up, right into the angry eyes of her father's murderer and the barrel of his gun. "Another one for me to kill," he snarled maliciously. The weak words of a man about to bleed to death.

Silently, determinedly, Hermione turned so her body was protecting the whimpering Harmony. With a wicked grin, he squeezed the trigger just as Horace launched himself at the gunman's wrist, throwing off his aim and making the bullet destroy a mirror. The man weakly raised the gun to hit Horace when Hermione came to her senses.

She felt rage rise in her at the injustice of it all. This was the second time in as many chances that her family had been murdered. She had been unable to mourn her parents the first time they had died, and likely wouldn't be able to mourn them as they should be this time either. She wanted the thief-turned-murderer to hurt as much as she did.

"Don't touch my dog," her voice was hoarse, and she almost didn't recognize it as her own. Angry at fate and at herself, Hermione unleashed her fury, using her raw magical power to knock the gun from his hand. Everything made of glass shattered as a strange wind picked up, spinning around the room and picking up bits of glass and shards of wood as it whirled.

Hermione couldn't breathe. It was as if she were being smothered by her guilt and pain, as if she were drowning in her anger. Was this how the Dark Harry felt? She was dimly aware that her body, despite the glass imbedded in her legs, was completely relaxed. Despite her grief, she filed the sensation safely in the back of her mind for later study. For now, she watched the dying man's head loll to one side, sapped of strength. Feeling something wet on her knee, Hermione looked down to see Horace staring up at her.

"It's okay, boy. You did just what I wanted you too--you warned my family. It's my fault I didn't do more." She said. Looking up, Hermione saw the man was dead, having lost too much blood. The whirlwind spun faster and faster in her anger. Unable to bear the pain anymore, she cried out, her screams joined by Harmony's crying, Horace's howling, and the distant wailing of sirens.

It was all her fault. She had only just begun and she had already failed in her mission to save her family and Harry. With her entire family dead, she had nowhere to go, and couldn't be sure she would ever be able to return to the wizarding world. She had failed her parents, failed Harmony, she had failed the entire world. Worse, she had failed Harry, the very person she was sent to save. She wanted to quit.

The third rule is that you must continue on with your appointed task, regardless of what happens. If a decision you make has an unhappy consequence, you are not permitted to simply give up.

She would not give up. She couldn't. Hermione Granger was nothing if not determined, and she would find a way to complete her appointed task, no matter the cost. If there was one thing her parents had taught her, it was do follow through with a promise, and always keep her word. She would honor her parents ideals, and complete the mission she had accepted. She had failed once, but she would not let everyone else down. Harry, Harmony, Horace, Sirius, Remus, the headmaster--she wouldn't disappoint them.

Hermione sniffled and began to brush the glass away from the small area unaffected by the whirlwind she had created. Shards of shattered glass sliced her fingers but she cleared a small space and lay Harmony gently on the smooth wooden floor. With a sigh of resignation, Hermione lay beside her sister, not bothering to clear the shards away from her chosen place of rest and resting her arm of the crying bundle. Horace wriggled his way closer and rested his head on Hermione's arm, whimpering in fear, his eyes shifting between the sisters, the dead man, and the wind that still spun steadily around them.

Hermione closed her eyes, exhausted. She wouldn't give up, but she needed her rest--the magical and emotional drain coupled with the blood loss from the glass was wearing on her. The distant sirens were closer now. There would be help soon, and in the mean time she could rest, if only for a short while.

Rest was elusive, however, as images of her family haunted her. Horrific memories of her parents after the Death Eater attack

overlapping with the gruesome scene around her, mocking her, reminding her of her failure. Giving up, Hermione chose to look at her sister, who had quieted at last.

As Hermione stared at the comforting sight of her unharmed baby sister and Horace, a series of no less than half a dozen pops were barely heard over the howling of the wind. In an unexpected turn of events, the Ministry of Magic had arrived.

“Merlin’s beard! You’d think it was Death Eaters that done this!” A gruff voice yelled over the raging wind.

“Must be a muggleborn doing it,” someone else said, pointing to the whirlwind.

Hermione sat up, pulling Harmony in her arms, looking for familiar faces. She was surprised to see a young Kingsley Shacklebolt looking wearily around the room. To her dismay, no one else was familiar. It was Kingsley that noticed her first as her magic reached the end of its limits and the wind died down.

“It’s her! She’s the one doing the magic!” Kingsley called out. As one, the group turned and looked at her. “Shouldn’t we get her out of here? The muggles will be here soon, and we can’t leave her--her magic may act up again.”

“Trainee Shacklebolt is right. We need to get her out of here at least until she’s stable.” Someone said.

“Merlin, look at her! She’s all scratched up! What happened to the kid?” A young woman said.

“That’s irrelevant. Trainee Shacklebolt, Trainee Tonks, you two take the kid to the Weasley residence. They volunteered to take in kids in situations like this, and Molly knows some mediwizardry so she can take care of the girl.” The leader said.

“What about the baby and the dog?” Tonks asked. Hermione couldn’t help but think she looked strange without pink hair.

"Take them. No reason to deprive the kid of the rest of her family," the leader said. "The rest of you, clean this mess up! We don't need to the muggles to see this, and they're nearly here."

Hermione could hear the sirens getting louder--they had to be close by, now. Tonks tried to take Harmony out of her arms, but Hermione refused to loosen her grip. Giving up, Tonks picked them both up, cutting herself on a piece of the windowpane in the process. Horace began to growl until Kingsley picked him up as well. "I'll need to be still for a while," Tonks said. "I'm going to take you some place safe." Hermione only nodded, numbly realizing that she would be going to the wizarding world.

Still in Tonks' arms, Hermione felt the strange sensation of side-along apparation and found herself outside the Burrow. With another pop, Kingsley was beside them, Horace squirming in his arms. Shifting Horace to one arm, he pounded on the door. Shuffling was heard, then a disheveled Mrs. Weasley opened the door.

"What's wrong? Has something--Oh my!" She had caught sight of Hermione. "What has happened?" She gasped.

"An attack--*not* Death Eaters. Looks like a muggle fight, but her powers activated when..." Kingsley trailed off. "Ministry Records state that you and your husband have offered to foster muggleborn children in situations like this. Are you willing to take in this girl?" He asked formally.

Molly nodded, reaching out for her without hesitation. "Of course Arthur and I will watch her. We'll do anything to help children." Tonks seemed reluctant to let her go, but relinquished her to Mrs. Weasley's grasp. "Oh my!" Mrs. Weasley had discovered Harmony.

"As best we can figure, it's her sister," Tonks said as Horace growled. "And her dog. We didn't want to split them up, all things considered."

Mr. Weasley appeared and took in the scene. "Why don't you all come in?" He asked.

Kingsley stepped forward. "I'm afraid I can't, Mr. Weasley. I have to report back to the Ministry. Trainee Tonks will stay here and question

the young lady.” Hermione would have been offended for the callous way she was being treated if she wasn’t so tired.

As Mrs. Weasley toted Hermione and Harmony into the kitchen, Hermione spied seven Weasley children peering over the crooked banister overhead and whispering to each other. Hermione shuddered when she saw Ron and Ginny, the memory of the dark future she was to change haunting her. “Poor dear,” Mrs. Weasley soothed. “It’s been difficult for you, hasn’t it? I’ll fix you up and make you some hot chocolate, alright? Then this nice lady is going to ask you some questions.”

“Do we get hot chocolate too?” A young Ron called. Mr. Weasley glanced at his wife then made his way up the stairs to deal with the children.

Mrs. Weasley set her down on the rickety kitchen table and bustled off to fetch some healing solutions and begin making the hot chocolate. Tonks, meanwhile, leaned against the table near Hermione, still holding Horace in her arms. She began to fiddle with her wand--Hermione recognized she had cast a recording charm.

“Hey there. I know this has been a really bad night, but I need you to answer a few questions for me, okay?” Tonks asked. Hermione nodded quietly, shifting Harmony as her arm started to go numb. “Can you tell me your name?”

“Hermione Jane Granger,” she said dutifully. She had been questioned by aurors before when she had found her parents tortured to death by Death Eaters, so she knew to answer questions fully. The trick was to make her answers seem like she was a six year old kid.

“Okay, Hermione, can you tell me who you are holding?” Tonks asked as Mrs. Weasley returned, potions and creams in hand.

“This is my sister Harmony. She’s a baby,” she added needlessly, cringing inwardly. She winced visibly as Mrs. Weasley began to pull out shards of glass.

She looked up as Mr. Weasley came back down stairs and took her sister in his arms. Hermione watched him carefully. She knew he was

a good father, of course, but she still wasn't quite ready to be separated just yet. Tonks nodded and asked, "can you tell me what happened tonight? I know it's hard, but I need to know."

I should tell the truth, she thought, *just not all of it*. "I was in my room and Horace--that's my puppy--started barking." Hermione swallowed her pain and pushed on. "My parents went downstairs and I went to Harmony because she was crying. I heard a bunch of noise and went downstairs. I took Harmony with me because I didn't want to leave her by herself. I was afraid someone would find her if she was alone." She hissed when Mrs. Weasley began to rub the healing cream over the cuts.

"When I got downstairs, my parents, my Uncle Jack, and two men I don't know were dead. I was sad and I started crying, but one of the men wasn't really dead, and he was going to kill me too until Horace bit him, and everything started spinning, and then you came," had she not been trying to hard to sound like a six year old, and had the situation not been so grim, she would have laughed. Mrs. Weasley started to work on her hands, tears brimming in her eyes.

A sudden movement caught her eye. Wormtail had scurried into the room. Hermione stiffened but didn't move from the table. It would look strange if she suddenly took off and picked up a rat for no reason. And so Hermione waited patiently as Wormtail sniffed his way closer, looking for something to eat.

In a moment of madness, Hermione tried out a theory she had been working on earlier concerning wandless magic. In her mind, she imagined everything Pettigrew had done to Harry and felt anger stir in her chest. She wanted him to pay dearly for what he had done. "RAT!" She shouted, pointing at Wormtail. She felt a surge of magic go through her body and straight at Peter Pettigrew, who was now human and sitting fearfully on the floor.

There was a brief moment of silence before there was a flurry of commotion. Tonks swore, shot a spell at Pettigrew, and activated some device. Seconds later half a dozen aurors apparated into the Burrow, all with their wands drawn.

"That's Pettigrew, that is! I thought him dead!" One of them shouted. Aurors surrounded the Weasley's in a flurry, all questioning them. "Hold up!" The man who identified Pettigrew shouted. "Trainee Tonks, report."

Tonks told him everything, from the emergency call to go to her house to how Hermione had revealed Peter Pettigrew. "Right then. Mr. And Mrs. Weasley, judging from the looks on your faces, I'd say you had no idea you were housing a man thought dead. You're both upstanding citizens, and I have no doubt you have no part in this. However, protocol demands you be questioned further, and you will be called to witness for the trial and questioning of Mr. Pettigrew. Because of this turn of events, you will not be able to care for the muggleborn, Hermione Granger. Trainee Tonks, take the girls and their dog to the Ministry for now."

"Yes sir," Tonks said, walking back towards the kitchen table. "Thank you, Mrs. Weasley, for taking care of Hermione's cuts." She grinned crookedly. "I'm not much of a healer."

Mrs. Weasley nodded with forced smile and tears in her eyes. "She looks like such a sweet thing, and to have been through all that, now she has to be bounced around even more. Do see to it that the little dears are taken care of."

Tonks nodded and took Harmony out of Mr. Weasley's arms and handed her to Hermione. Tucking Horace under one arm and lifting Hermione and her sister with the other, Tonks apparated away. Before they vanished, Hermione caught a glimpse of Wormtail as he was lifted up by two aurors. There was one thought that seemed as if it would always haunt her.

What have I done?

A/N: Not a very cheerful chapter, and rather dull at the beginning, but there were things that I needed to happen. Yes, I killed Hermione's parents and her uncle. But I did leave her Harmony and Horace! I know, the story has a decidedly dark tone right now, but things do get better for her, and she'll even get to meet Harry soon. Make no mistake--there will be good things happen, but I have never believed that anything is free. If I give my characters something, you can be

sure they will pay for it in some way later. Keep that in mind for what happens in the next chapter.

On a lighter note, I would like to thank everyone who read the last chapter, and give special thanks to those who reviewed. That said, please review and tell me what you think.

Cheers,

Madm05

Chapter Two: Consolation

Hermione sat huddled in a broom closet, weeping bitterly. She rocked back and forth, holding Harmony close as she cried. How could everything have gone from being so wonderful and under to control to being so horribly wrong so quickly? It seemed as though every time she took a step forward, something knocked her back three more. Horace pushed his cold wet nose against her leg as she sobbed while Harmony fussed in her arms, drawing her attention away from her bitter thoughts.

“A single grain of sand can tip the scale, right Horace?” She choked, looking at the puppy beside her with tears in her eyes. “I saved your life, and changed the course of history as I know it. Now everything I know is useless,” she sobbed. “How, Horace? How am I supposed to fix everything, when all I do is make mistakes? I’m supposed to keep Harry from going mad and becoming a Dark Lord, but I haven’t done anything to help him, have I? I’ve probably made everything worse!”

Hermione sniffled as she continued to rock back and forth. Everything had been... okay that morning. It hadn’t been pleasant by any stretch of the word, but it hadn’t been horrible either. After departing the Weasleys and much discussion, she and her diminished family had been sent to stay with Ms. Pearson, a kindly old witch who, upon learning Hermione was a muggleborn, explained all about magic to her.

It had been a long, sleepless night for her. Her parents, she had decided, were simply destined to die. At least in this world she had Harmony and Horace. Rather than wallow in her grief, she decided to stray from her normal path of logical pessimism, and look at the six days before their deaths as a mini vacation of sorts where she got to visit with them again. She considered that if she had somehow gone to the time right after they had died in the first reality, she wouldn’t even have had those six days. She felt it was the only way to stay sane and complete her mission.

After waking up after her one hour nap, a brief respite haunted by the Dark Harry, and the two sisters had dressed in Ministry-provided clothes, Harmony had said “My-My, wuh-ooo”, which sounded

remarkably like 'love you' in baby talk. Hermione had been so happy the baby toys Harmony had been playing with began to dance around.

The day had gone progressively down hill from there. During breakfast, Harmony fell, scaring Hermione and causing the time traveler to cause a nearby window to shatter. Ms. Pearson wouldn't come very close to her after that.

Then there was the Weasley hearing-- it didn't take very long; the Weasleys were found not guilty of harboring a criminal. Next came Peter Pettigrew's trial. He and Sirius Black had been questioned under Veritaserum and the scandalous truth had come out. Remus Lupin had even been summoned to testify, as he was a friend to both parties, and Tonks was there, because she had been there when he had changed back into human.

To add insult to injury, Hermione had been called to the center floor of the Wizengamot Hearing to testify-- only they didn't care about Wormtail and Padfoot anymore. They wanted to hear all about her wandless magic.

Hermione banged her head against the wall of the closet. How could she have been so foolish? She had known that something was off-- she had known her magic had been acting up constantly, for the slightest things-- and yet she had agreed to attempt a demonstration. It had been a good idea at the start-- she would pretend to try, fail miserably, and her wandless magic would be written off as a one time incident and be considered nothing more than a fluke. Then she would be able to practice in private and eventually she could master the skill. That was until Delores Umbridge started causing problems.

"You see?" Umbridge had said in a superior tone. "Muggleborns just aren't very talented in magic. They shouldn't even be permitted to attend schooling, they're so far behind. All they do is hold back the Purebloods."

Hermione had felt her anger rising. Every glass of water in the room shattered and the copy of the Daily Prophet she had been pretending to summon flew into her waiting hands. It wasn't until she had calmed slightly that she realized she had effectively condemned herself. She had proven she could do wandless magic at will and made herself

into a spectacle. Another argument ensued-- everyone wanted to be the custodial guardian of the only known wandless witch in the world, even if she was a muggleborn-- especially Lucius Malfoy.

Horried at the turn of events, Hermione had fled as stealthily and quickly as possible with Harmony and Horace. It hadn't been difficult to slip from the room-- everyone else was so wrapped up in what they would gain by being her guardian, no one saw her slip through a nearby door, Horace and Harmony alongside her. It had been quite easy.

And so she sat in a broom closet, sobbing hysterically. She had never felt so out of control in her life, not even when she had used a time turner in her third year. There was nothing she could do-- no one would listen to a six year old child. She could only hope that Sirius would be allowed to have a role in Harry's life. Perhaps Sirius could keep Harry from the road to darkness since she was so likely to fail. Hopefully some good would come from her rash actions.

A shaft of light fell over her as the door opened. Looking up, Hermione spotted Remus Lupin standing in the broom closet doorway. "Hello," he said in his gentle voice. "I thought you might like some company."

Hermione sobbed harder, looking at him through her tears. "It's all wrong! They weren't supposed to die! They weren't supposed to leave me!" She cried louder, her distress causing Harmony to cry out with her sister.

Remus sat down and pulled the two sisters into his lap. "Yes, it's unfair, isn't it? It is a sad day when those we love leave us," Remus soothed, stroking her hair with his right hand and cradling Harmony with his left. "You must remember that they loved you very much, and that they are very proud of you. You have done many good things, little Hermione. You've saved an innocent man from prison and you've brought a traitor to justice. That is something to be proud of, though that probably means very little to you, just now."

Hermione sniffled and changed the topic. She didn't want to talk about her parents or Uncle Jack. It hurt too much. "How did you find me?"

Remus smiled. "I was standing near my friend Padfoot--that's Sirius Black--after I was called on to testify. We saw you leave, but since he's technically still on trial, I followed you. We wanted to thank you for all that you have done for us. I know that it is very painful for you right now, but it may help you to know that some good has come from all of this. This may sound silly, but is there anything we can do to help you?" Remus asked. His concern and honesty were so genuine Hermione nearly began to cry again.

"Can you keep me away from Mr. Malfoy? He kept looking at me like I'm going to be dinner," she joked weakly. She shuddered and reached out to touch Harmony, who was now fast asleep and drooling all over Remus. "I'm afraid of him," she admitted quietly. "I don't like the way he looks at me, and I don't think he wants to be my guardian out of the goodness of his heart. I'm worried about what he would do to Harmony and Horace-- they're all I have left," she started crying again as the lights overhead flickered.

She cringed. "And then there's that. It's never done that before." She looked up at Remus, glad to see a familiar face, even if he didn't really know her. "I've always known I could do magic, and things would happen-- I'd summon a book or something, but it was never... And now I have no control over it. It happens whether I want it to or not."

Hermione began to cry again. The tears she didn't cry the night before began to trickle down her cheeks. "So I can't control my magic, I'm worried about my sister and my dog, and I don't know what to do." Sobs wracked her body as Remus held her and made soothing sounds, simply letting her cry.

In the back of her mind, Hermione realized that Remus must feel awkward-- he was holding two children in his arms that were of no relation to him as the eldest soaked his shirt with her tears and told him all of her fears and troubles and the youngest drooled all over him. It didn't help that her thoughts were so scattered that she couldn't think properly. Hermione couldn't bring herself to pull away and apologize for being so childish-- it had been so long since anyone had been able to comfort her, that she relished the feeling.

When at last she was out of tears, Remus spoke again. "We had better get back. Sirius has been cleared, so we'll try to help you out, but you're going to have to go back and face them. Do you think you can?"

Hermione nodded and wriggled out of his lap. Standing, she reached out for Harmony but Remus stopped her. "You have enough on your shoulders to deal with just now. I'll carry your sister for a while-- her name is Harmony, right?"

"Yes," Hermione replied, keeping pace beside him as he walked. "Harmony Belle Granger. I got stuck with Hermione Jane," she made a face. "No one can say Hermione right, and Jane is boring."

Remus chuckled. "There is nothing wrong with either name-- you should try being named Remus-- now that is a pesky name. I've had so many people ask me if I have a twin named Romulus, I'm ready to snap at the next person who asks."

Hermione giggled. "Don't worry, I won't ask you if you have a twin. It would be too easy to poke fun at my name. Why don't we call a truce?" *I need to keep him talking to me,* Hermione thought as an idea blossomed in her mind. *I need to be safe, and what safer place than with Remus Lupin? There is the werewolf thing, but I should be able to get around that. First I have to convince him that he would be a good guardian.*

Remus chuckled. "Deal," he agreed. "Ow!" He suddenly yelped. Hermione looked up to see Harmony, awake again, pulling Remus' hair. Harmony giggled and released his hair. He chuckled again and bounced her in his arms. "Aren't you a cute thing."

"You know what? You'd make a good dad," Hermione said, careful to keep her eyes ahead of her, even when Remus made a choked noise. "I feel a lot better now. Some people have been nice to me, but they haven't been very comforting. The people trying to figure out what to do with me don't really care that my family just died last night." She said quietly, not needing to pretend to be in pain. She looked up as Harmony pulled on his hair again. "That means she likes you."

"What does she do when she doesn't like you?" He half joked, wincing as she tugged his hair again.

"She throws things. I highly recommend you stay on her good side-- she has very good aim." Hermione replied with a grin as they approached the door to the Hearing. She stood before the door, reluctant to enter. What fate awaited her? She looked up to see Remus looking at her strangely. "What's the matter?"

"You don't act very much like a six year old," he said, watching her carefully.

Hermione remained calm-- she had planned for this. "I'm almost seven," she defended herself. "And I'm very mature for my age. My mum thinks--" she swallowed thickly, "thought I might be a genius or a prodigy. I've been reading since I was two years old, and I remember everything I have ever read." She said firmly.

It wasn't entirely a lie-- her parents were convinced she was more intelligent than normal, but they had never mentioned her being a prodigy, and Remus didn't need to know that she was very nearly three when she learned to read. Her ability to remember everything she read was very real, however. To her younger self, it was something else that made her an oddity, so she read constantly to hide her ability. Reading soon became a difficult habit to break, especially after books became her best friends.

Normally she wouldn't tell anyone her secret, but she desperately needed Remus to see that she couldn't fall into the hands of a less than noble person. Throwing in words like *prodigy* and *genius*, while not entirely accurate, made her more important, thus ensuring that Dumbledore would fight to keep her safe. Besides, she reasoned, considering she had attended Hogwarts for six years, she was sure she could make everyone believe she was a genius. She could study more advanced subjects when no one was there to question her to keep up appearances.

Remus looked deep in thought when he pushed the door open. Good. Hopefully he would go to Dumbledore and impress upon him the importance of keeping her away from Malfoy. Taking her by the hand,

he led her into the chaotic room. Everyone was scrambling around, looking for--

"There she is!" Ms. Pearson shouted, pointing at her. The members of the Wizengamot looked at her with a sigh of relief. They were treating her like she was nothing more than an experiment they had yet to observe! Feeling her anger building, she calmed herself by listing ingredients frequently used in various calming potions.

Remus released her hand and knelt down before untangling Harmony's hand from his hair. "Here you are, little Hermione. I'll see what I can do for you and your sister," he whispered in her ear. Dodging questions and wizards, Remus walked as quickly as he could towards Professor Dumbledore and Sirius before Hermione lost sight of him.

"Perhaps your parents never taught you to wander off," came a smooth voice from her left. "It is a lesson you will have to learn, eventually. Perhaps I would be so lucky as to be the one to teach you." Hermione turned and looked up into the cold eyes of Lucius Malfoy. Reflexively, she took a step back. He grinned at her obvious reaction.

"Oh Hermione!" Ms. Pearson said, bustling up to her as Lucius Malfoy melted back into the crowd. "You gave me quite a scare there, my dear. You weren't gone long were you? Here, let me hold your sister and you can put your dog back on his leash."

"Her name is Harmony, and his name is Horace," Hermione replied half-heartedly, tying Horace up and sitting in her seat. It annoyed her that no one seemed to remember their names, almost as if they weren't important. *They're important to me*, she thought vehemently. She felt a tugging and looked to her right-- Harmony was chewing on her hair. "Just don't choke on it," Hermione said tiredly, making a face. Harmony gurgled happily and continued chewing.

With a sigh she looked around from her seat next to Ms. Pearson, and saw that Remus, Sirius, and Professor Dumbledore were huddled together. They seemed to be arguing. Her stomach tied in knots. That was not a good sign.

The Minister stood before the Wizengamot, holding a bit of parchment. "Very well, now that our little wandless-wonder has returned," Fudge began jovially, "we can proceed with naming a guardian. It is our decision that Hermione Granger should be in the custodial care of Lucius--"

The paper he was reading from burst into flames. The Wizengamot swiveled around in their seats and stared at her. Hermione looked innocently back. "Can I help you?"

Fudge cleared his throat. "Well, I guess we'll just have to get another copy of the paperwork, and then--"

"Actually Cornelius, I would like to ask that we all take recent developments into consideration." Professor Dumbledore interrupted.

Fudge frowned. "What would these 'recent developments' be?"

"Well, as your memory is clearly not as good as it used to be, I will remind you that the young Miss Granger and her family slipped out of this Hearing with no one knowing." He said cheerfully as the Minister flushed. "The only one to notice was the gentleman who escorted her back-- Remus Lupin. It seems we have all been a bit callous and have not been very kind to the young Miss Granger-- she informed us herself that her parents died only last night, and that she found them." Many began to shift uncomfortably in their seats while others lowered their heads in shame. Others didn't seem to care at all. No one, however, looked at Hermione.

"In fact, it seems the reason for Miss Granger's escape was to take the opportunity, an opportunity that we denied her, to mourn. I propose that we give custody of Miss Granger to Remus Lupin, as he is the only one in the whole of the Wizengamot that bothered to follow her when she left and took the time to comfort a child who has suffered a terrible loss."

Her heart leapt as the headmaster spoke, and prayed silently that Remus would win. She peeked over at the werewolf. He looked terrified. Murmurs spread through out the room until the Wizengamot was divided into two groups-- Lucius Malfoy had a slight majority over Remus.

"I can provide a more stable home for the girl," Lucius argued. "The Malfoy family is renowned for their wealth and prestige. She will want for nothing. Look at his clothes-- I dare say he would have her dressed in the best rags he could afford," he sneered. "The Malfoy Manor is more than large enough for her to have her own room and solitude should she wish it."

"And you, Mr. Lupin?" Fudge asked in a tone that made it clear the choice was already made.

Remus cleared his throat nervously. "Well, I am a resident of Number 12 Grimmauld Place, and I--"

"Grimmauld Place? That is part of the Black estate!" One wizard called out.

"Yes," Remus flushed. "Yes it is. As I was saying, I--"

"You are not a member of the Black family." A witch interrupted.

"No he's not, but I am," Sirius boomed, standing. Still clad in chains, he was a frightening sight to behold. "Grimmauld Place is my property, and Remus is a guest in my house. Remus is a brother to me in all but blood, and it would be a pleasure to share the Black family fortune with him and any he would like to call family," Sirius said, nodding to Hermione.

"Yes, so you see, I have a large residence where Hermione and her family would not feel trapped in the least. The Black Fortune is more than enough for us. The only other thing I have to offer her is the knowledge that I will comfort and care for her and her sister as if they were my own daughters."

"At least I am not a werewolf and won't kill the girl during the next full moon," Malfoy snarled. The room fell silent before whispers broke out. Apparently they had forgotten that detail from the earlier trial. Hermione cringed. She had been hoping they wouldn't remember.

Remus stiffened. "I have considered that issue. My friend Sirius has agreed to hire a Potions Master to brew the Wolfsbane Potion. As a further precaution, there is a cellar below the Black Manor, where I

can be contained should I not get the potion in time or it was brewed incorrectly. The children will be safe.”

Lucius scoffed. “I offer the safety, and can offer the prestige of the Malfoy name. Clearly I am the better choice.”

“What’s her name?” Remus asked suddenly.

“What?” Lucius asked, eyes narrowing.

“The young lady we are fighting for custody of. Tell me her name.” Remus reiterated.

Lucius began to sputter. “What are you driving at?” Remus waited quietly. “Hermininy.” Malfoy replied shortly.

“What is her sister’s name?” Remus asked another question. Hermione smirked as she watched Malfoy begin to sweat. “We’ll try an easier question. What’s her dog’s name? You don’t know?” Remus turned to the Wizengamot. “The young lady’s name is not ‘Hermininy’, it’s Hermione. Her sister’s name is Harmony and her dog’s name is Horace.” Hermione smiled as she saw many approving nods. “I cannot offer her a prestigious name, but I can assure you I will at least remember hers.”

Hermione watched the debate continue on, each side trying to prove the other would not care for her properly. Harmony had long since given up chewing on her hair, leaving a glob of drool for good measure, and was now fussing in Ms. Pearson’s arms. “She’s hungry,” Hermione whispered. Ms. Pearson nodded and began the hunt for baby food.

A few moments later, a handful of green baby food sailed through the air and hit Lucius Malfoy in his ear. “Gah! Gah!” Harmony babbled and tossed another handful of baby food.

Hermione stood up, fighting a smile. “That means she doesn’t like you.”

“You should try to stay on Harmony’s good side because she has good aim,” Remus added and walked over to where the girls sat with

a smile. "If she likes you, she pulls your hair." Harmony promptly began to giggle and tug Remus' hair, covering part of it with whatever she had been throwing at Malfoy.

With a hiss of anger, Lucius Malfoy raised his cane to strike either Remus or Harmony, Hermione wasn't sure. Understanding the elder Malfoy's intention, Remus moved his body in front of the sisters to protect them. Panicked, Hermione lifted her hand as if to ward off the blow, and inadvertently used her magic to throw him across the room. "Don't touch my sister," she said, her voice trembling with anger and fear. Everyone began to whisper to one another about what they had witnessed-- both Lucius Malfoy's attempt to strike someone and Hermione's wandless defense against him.

"Silence! Silence!" Fudge tried to regain control. His face red, he belted out, "custody of Hermione Granger and Harmony Granger is hereby granted to Remus Lupin!" Hermione nearly wept with relief. Finally, something was going right. "However! The Ministry will be checking in with Mr. Lupin and the children at random intervals to be sure they are being cared for. If at any time there is suspicion that the children are *not* being properly cared for, Remus Lupin will be stripped of custody."

Judging by the goofy grin on his face, Remus didn't care about the Ministry's extra stipulation. "I'll take her now, Ms. Pearson," Remus said, reaching out for Harmony.

"Of course, Mr. Lupin. I'm very pleased to hear that you have custody over the little dears. They're such sweet things." Ms. Pearson said, patting Hermione on the head. Hermione wondered if Ms. Pearson remembered she had kept away from her all morning.

Remus grinned wider. "Why thank you," he turned to Hermione. "Why don't you grab Horace's leash, and we'll see about getting those papers filled out, okay?" He asked her kindly as he reached out to grab the bag containing the nightclothes she and Harmony had been wearing when the Ministry found them.

With a toothy smile, Hermione reached for Horace's leash, only to have it burst into a flurry of butterflies. Remus laughed merrily as the swarm of butterflies flew throughout the chamber until fluttering out of

the room. Ignoring another wave of whispers as witches and wizards alike pointed and stared, Hermione picked up Horace. "I'll just carry him." She said. "It will be easier."

Sirius, finally released from his bindings, bounded over and lifted Hermione, Horace and all, into his arms and spun her around. "Thank you, Hermione, for everything that you have done-- you saved me."

Hermione smiled but didn't say anything. *Sirius has no idea*, she thought with much amusement. In the back of her mind she noted wryly that she had something of a habit of saving him-- she helped him escape in her third year, had *attempted* to rescue him in fifth year, though it was a trap, and now she had freed him from Azkaban.

"Well, we'd better get the paperwork done before Mr. Malfoy thinks of a way to steal you girls," Remus said. Horace barked. "And you, Horace," he amended as Harmony began chewing on his hair.

As Remus was filling out the paperwork required to be named her legal guardian, the Minister approached Hermione and Sirius. He smiled thinly. "Apologies, Mr. Black, for the mistake. The Ministry would like to present to you a temporary wand until you can get a replacement," he said, handing him a slender wand.

Hermione's brow furrowed. "What about compensation? You put Sirius in prison for five years without giving him a trial-- shouldn't he get something for that?"

Fudge looked at Hermione in surprise, his mouth opening and closing like a fish. "Well, I suppose something can be worked out," he said nervously, clearing his throat. "Very talented, aren't you? You're a clever little girl, and you can do wandless magic. Rather extraordinary, really."

Hermione looked at him coldly. "I'm sure you could do wandless magic if you wanted. All you have to do is have people break into your house and kill your parents and Uncle, then go find their bodies. Rather simple, really."

The Minister was struck silent and stared at her, openmouthed. He continued to stare until Remus returned, Harmony still chewing

happily on his hair. The werewolf cleared his throat. Fudge snapped back to reality and coughed nervously. "Well, I'll just be going then. I shall send you an owl, Mr. Black, in regards to compensation for past mistakes." With that, he scurried away.

"What was that about?" Remus asked, glancing over at Sirius. Sirius launched into the story of their brief conversation with the Minister while he was away. Walking out of the Ministry, he looked torn between being angry at Fudge, laughing at the look on Fudge's face, and being sympathetic towards Hermione for all she had endured.

"Are we off to Grimmauld Place?" Remus asked, shifting Harmony to his other arm and adjusting the bag of clothes he was holding.

Sirius nodded. "We need to go there and get a few things taken care of first-- get the girls settled in and such. Then we can work on getting my Godson." Hermione's heart leapt. She would get to live with Harry! Her mission would be so much easier now that she would be with the person she was to guide. "That reminds me, you wouldn't mind sharing a house with a little boy, would you Hermione?"

Hermione hid a smile. "No, I don't mind. It will be nice to have another person to talk to."

The two men grinned. "Well then, Moony and I will try to get you a playmate as soon as we can, how does that sound?" Sirius turned to Remus. "I don't suppose you have enough money for us to use the Knight Bus, do you Moony? They don't let prisoners have money in Azkaban."

Remus checked his pockets and pulled out a few sickles. "It looks like it should cover a trip for us." Remus raised his hand and with a sharp BANG, a large purple bus appeared and a plump woman leaned out.

"Welcome to the Knight Bus, emergency transport for the stranded witch or wizard. Just stick out your wand hand, step on board, and we can take you anywhere you want to go. My name is Beatrice-- oh my stars! You're Sirius Black!" She gasped. "I'd heard there was evidence that you were innocent and oh! Why, that little girl must be, oh what was the name I saw in the paper? Hermy-won?" The two men and witch cringed at the gross mispronunciation of her name.

"Yes, you look about the right age. Is it true that you do wandless magic?"

Remus stepped forward. "Our destination is number 12 Grimmauld Place. If you would please stand aside and--"

"That's part of the Black estate!" She bubbled, clapping excitedly. "So it is true. I must say though, I didn't think you would want to take care of a little girl like this, how ever did you get custody over her?"

"Just let us on the bus, will you? We have two little girls that have had a rough few days and need some rest. Now if you would do your job, and tell us the fare?" Sirius snapped, exhaustion from the day's events weighing heavily on him.

The woman had the grace to blush. "The total comes to thirteen sickles for all of you."

"Well, that's all of my money," Remus sighed, handing the thirteen sickles to the waiting conductor and stepping aboard.

"Don't worry, Moony. There's too much money in the Black family vault anyways." He clapped his empty hand on Remus' shoulder. "I meant it earlier when I said you were my brother in all but blood."

Soon they were all seated and the Knight Bus took off again with a thunderous BANG. As the bus swerved through the streets making it's way towards Grimmauld Place, Hermione felt her eyes drifting close. Her lack of sleep the night before was catching up with her. Half asleep, Hermione felt the pocket of her robe, checking to be sure her journal was tucked safely away. Satisfied that all was well, Hermione leaned against Remus and fell asleep.

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A/N: This chapter was a monster in disguise. I had to rewrite it three times before I was satisfied with it. On the bright side, we finally get to meet Harry in the next chapter. It will be a bit creepy, but everything will be explained in time. Oh, did anyone guess I was going to give Lupin custody? House points if you did.

No fluff just yet, but then, this is the day after she found her dead parents. Give her some time. Things do get better from here. As fair warning though, there will be dark times on occasion. I've put a dark spin on my story, and it's not going to just leave anytime soon. For those of you looking for fluff, hang on, it's coming, but there are a lot of things happening right now.

On another note, **The Thirteenth Sapphire** brought up the idea of something good coming from a bad event--this has already happened. Hermione's parents died, and because of that, she was brought to the wizarding world, a world she can now influence, such as freeing Sirius. I'm not a complete ogre.

That said, please read and review.

Cheers,

Madm05

Chapter Three: Friends

"I don't think I would like having to live here." Hermione stated, looking up at the house before her.

"I agree," Sirius said, cringing. "It's so, I don't know, uniform."

"Boring," Hermione said. "The word you're looking for is boring." She looked back at the house. There was nothing fascinating about the house before her. In fact, it was almost an exact replica of all of the houses on the entire street. Each house was the same all along Privet Drive, and Number 4 was no different. "Are they expecting us?"

"Nope!" Sirius said cheerfully. "Come on, Hermione. Let's get Harry and get out of here. If we're gone too long, Remus will have puppies. I'm actually surprised he let you come with me to get my godson." Hermione smiled in agreement. Her new guardian was a bit overprotective.

They walked up the drive, Sirius in a suit he had transfigured from a set of robes, and Hermione in a pale blue muggle dress retrieved from her house shortly after Remus, or Papa Remus as she called him now, became her guardian. The last four days had been some of the longest days in her life, first losing her parents, the trial, then two days to make Grimmauld Place a little more welcoming and empty her old home of things she wanted to keep before Remus sold it. The money, he said, would go into a Gringotts vault for her to have after she graduated from Hogwarts.

Now, on the fifth day, Sirius knocked on the door, waiting patiently for someone to answer. Hermione looked to her left and saw a pair of green eyes peeking through the window before they vanished. Only the movement of the curtain told her anyone had been there.

Several moments passed before Sirius knocked again. Suddenly the door swung open, revealing the fattest man Hermione had ever seen in her life. "Can I help you?" He asked, his large mustache had bread crumbs stuck in it and twitched as he spoke.

Sirius cleared his throat. "Yes, I need to speak with you, if you please, in private. It concerns a young man in your care by the name of Harry Potter."

The overly large man began to twitch. "Well, please come in. So sorry, I didn't catch your name. What was it?"

"Sirius Black," he replied with a forced smile, stepping through the door. "The charming young lady beside me is Hermione Granger." Hermione smiled tightly and gave a small curtsy.

"Welcome," he said, his tone slightly suspicious as he watched them walk into his home. "My name is Vernon Dursley. Petunia, my wife, is in the kitchen just now, but she'll be out soon. Now, I believe you wished to speak to me concerning my nephew?"

"Vernon," a tall, horse-like woman began, stepping into the room. "Who is-- Sirius Black!" She shrieked, stumbling back, a look of terror on her face. "Vernon, get away from him! He's a murderer!"

Hermione ignored them, knowing Sirius could straighten out the situation. Where was Harry? She had seen him only moments before, and now... her eyes fell on the cupboard under the stairs and she felt a tingling sensation. Of course. Harry had told her he didn't get Dudley's second room until he started getting his Hogwarts letters. Harry was in there, she could feel it. Her eyes narrowed. That cupboard certainly didn't seem very big. Hermione tried to control the anger rising within her, but the sight of Harry's cupboard, knowing he was inside, was too much for her. A vase sitting on a shelf shattered.

"Hermione," Sirius sighed as the room fell silent, the Dursleys watching Hermione as a small wind began to whirl around her. "You really need to work on that."

The young girl glanced at him and began to walk towards the staircase. "I can't help but notice you have a lock on the cupboard under the stairs. It makes me wonder-- if it is obviously not there to keep someone out, is it to keep someone in, perhaps?" Without another word, Hermione drew back the bolt and opened the door.

Inside, laying on his side, was Harry Potter. As the light from the room fell over him, he jerked up and looked at her in fear. How could this be the same Harry? He was... so small and so afraid. She had never seen a boy so small and skinny before-- he looked as though he would break if she were to embrace him.

Seeing his fear, Hermione smiled warmly, offering her hand to him. "Hello," she said, keeping her voice low and soft. "Would you like to go for a walk with me while the grownups talk?"

Tentatively, Harry reached out and grabbed her hand and let her pull him from his cupboard. "Sirius," Hermione said, as she guided him towards the family room. "I'm going to go for a walk with Harry and tell him a few things, while you explain to his aunt and uncle what has happened recently, okay?"

Sirius nodded, his eyes on Harry as if he were seeing a ghost from his past. Taking in Harry's condition, he looked torn between going to his godson and terrorizing the Dursleys. "Yes, you do that," he said darkly, turning a fierce glare on the quaking Dursleys.

Still holding Harry's hand, Hermione pulled him outside just as she heard Sirius snarl at the Dursleys for their treatment of his godson. "Well, that could have gone better," she rolled her eyes. "So, do you want to go to the park where we can sit and talk?"

"Who are you?" Harry asked weakly.

"Oh!" Hermione mentally kicked herself-- she'd forgotten Harry didn't know her. She secretly hoped he'd forget that she knew there was a park here in Surrey. "How rude of me. I'm Hermione Granger. The man I came here with is Sirius Black." She grinned widely. "We've come to take you away from here."

Harry stopped walking for a moment as his eyes glazed over. "T-take me away? Are you my family? Why did I have to stay with my aunt and uncle for so long? Are you my sister?" He asked excitedly.

Hermione laughed. "Yes, we're taking you away. You'll have to come back and visit your aunt and uncle for a few weeks every summer, I guess, but you'll be leaving here soon. We are sort of your family--

Sirius will explain all of that to you later. Sirius will also explain why you had to stay here for so long, and no, I am most certainly not your sister.” He looked ready to speak again but Hermione cut him off. “Take me to the park, and I’ll tell you everything I can, okay?”

Harry nodded his agreement and set off for the nearby park, pulling Hermione with him with more strength than she had thought he had. There was a glimmer of hope shining brightly in his eyes and his mouth was curved into a smile of excitement. Generally, Harry avoided the park like the plague because Dudley and his friends were always there, but he’d gladly go to the park for a while if it meant he could leave Privet Drive.

Once they reached the park, Hermione moved towards a small, unoccupied bench and sat down. Harry immediately sat next to her, waiting for her to tell him what she had promised.

“Well, as I said, I’m Hermione Granger. We’re going to be sharing a house. The man I came with is Sirius Black--he’s your godfather.” She smiled. “He and I have come to take you away from here to our home, Number 12 Grimmauld Place.”

“Are you his daughter then?” Harry asked, looking at her strangely. “You don’t look like him.”

Hermione forced a smile. It was still hard to think of her parents. “No. No, I’m not his daughter. I just live with him and Papa Remus--that’s Sirius’ best friend. Sirius and Papa Remus were friends with your dad when they were younger-- they’ll be able to tell you all sorts of things about your parents.”

“Really?” He said excitedly. “I’ve always wondered what my parents were like before they died in the car crash. Will my godfather be able to tell me what they looked like? Or does he have any pictures?”

Hermione felt a pang in her chest. There were so many lies to overcome. “Yes, I’m sure Sirius has pictures somewhere. But Harry,” she bit her lip. Should she tell him? Yes, she decided, he would be angry with her later if she didn’t. “There is more to your parents’ death than you’ve been told. I can’t tell you what happened-- it’s not my place. Sirius will tell you later, and I know I keep saying Sirius will tell

you, but it really isn't my place to say anything. But you must know that it would take more than a car crash to kill your parents. I mean, they were two of the most powerful witch and wizard in the magical community, and--"

"Witch? Wizard?" Harry asked, wide-eyed. "What do you mean? Magic isn't real, it doesn't exist...does it?" He seemed slightly nervous.

Hermione sighed as she nodded. She hadn't meant to tell him that much. "It would have been easier if Sirius had told you, but I can explain some of it to you. Yes, magic is real, and I can prove it." She looked around to make sure no one was watching and saw a stick laying on the ground. "Watch that stick over there," she said. As Harry did as he was told, Hermione concentrated and pulled up a feeling of desperation-- her desperation for Harry to believe her-- and focused her magic to make the twig levitate.

Harry gasped excitedly, still watching the floating branch. "Can you show me how to do that?"

Hermione laughed again. "We'll see. I'm still teaching myself to do it right now, but I'll try and teach you when I know exactly what I'm doing, okay?" Harry nodded happily. "You can't tell anyone, though. You can't talk to anyone about magic unless they are a witch or a wizard-- people who don't have magic shouldn't really know."

Harry nodded again, his eyes brimming with happiness. "Am I a wizard then?" Hermione nodded. "Wow. I get to leave, I found out I'm a wizard...this is a great day!" He grinned. "Thanks for telling me, Hermione."

She shrugged. "No problem, Harry. What are friends for?" Harry sat very still, staring at her. "What's the matter?" Hermione asked, concerned.

"F-friends? Are we friends?" He asked quietly, almost as he were afraid of what she would say. Hermione could see he was nervous, but she could also see he was hopeful. Inwardly she cursed the Dursleys for their treatment of Harry. Had he been deprived of everything as a child?

"Yes," she forced herself to smile brightly. "Of course we're friends!" Hermione pulled him into a tight embrace, trying to fill that single hug with everything he had missed in his youth. When she felt him tense, she gave him a small kiss on the cheek and drew back. "I'll always be--"

"Yuck! My freaky cousin was kissed by a girl! I hope he gets sick and dies from it. I know I sure wouldn't want to be kissed by some girl--they're gross." A voice yelled loudly.

Harry and Hermione whipped around and saw Dudley Dursley standing in a group of snickering boys. "Yeah, girls are gross." One of the boys echoed.

Hermione quirked an eyebrow. "I'm sure your mothers would love to know that you think they are gross. Why don't you go tell them?"

The boys were struck silent and shifted uncomfortably. "They're our mum's. They're not gross, only girls are." Dudley snapped.

With a sigh, Hermione rolled her eyes and opened her mouth to speak. "Leave her alone, Dudley." Harry said darkly. Hermione shuddered-- he had spoken in the same tone that the Dark Harry had spoken after he had killed Snape. "Leave my friend alone."

"Friend?" Dudley sneered, oblivious to how angry Harry was. "Who would want to be friends with a freak like you?"

Suddenly Harry looked unsure. "Harry's not a freak, and I'm happy to say I'm his friend," Hermione replied defiantly, straining to keep her anger under control. It wouldn't do to use magic where she could be seen by muggles.

Harry puffed out his chest a little. "Not as smart as you thought, are you Dudley?"

"You mean he actually thinks?" Hermione asked Harry, her voice light.

Harry laughed. "Not often. Let's go Hermione." With that he stood and took Hermione by the hand, leading her away. "Do you think Sirius

will be done talking to my Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon?" He asked, excitement in his voice.

Hermione couldn't help smiling again at his obvious eagerness. She was glad to be able to meet Harry before he had begun to suppress all of his feelings as he had in the other timeline. "I'm sure he's had more than enough time to explain everything to them. All we'll have to do is gather your belongings, and then--" Hermione suddenly found herself on the ground, a sharp sting on her knee. A quick glance as she sat up revealed it was cut on a rock and was bleeding.

"You're such a stupid girl," Dudley sneered as he stood over her, Harry's head locked under his arm. "I'll teach you not to be friends with freaks like *him*." A few of Dudley's friends grabbed hold of Harry, cheering Dudley on.

Hermione felt her panic and anger rising. She couldn't do magic, not now-- it would get her into even more trouble than she already was. The last thing she needed was the Ministry investigating Remus for not being an adequate guardian and allowing her to perform magic in front of muggles.

Dudley grabbed hold of her hair and pulled hard. Determined not to make a sound, Hermione bit her lip. As quickly as Dudley had grabbed her, he let her go and hit the ground with a thud. Harry had broken loose and hit Dudley square in the jaw, knocking him away from her. Grabbing her hand, Harry pulled Hermione up and took off running for Privet Drive.

Panting, the pair reached their destination just as Sirius stepped through the door. "Harry, Hermione! I was just coming to find you so--" he broke off. "What happened?" He demanded, looking at Hermione's scraped knee.

"I fell," she said quickly.

"Hermione told me you're my godfather, then Dudley pushed her and pulled her hair. I punched him." Harry supplied.

Sirius laughed. "Was it a good shot?" Harry grinned and nodded. "And you Hermione, lying? I'll have to tell Remus." Sirius mock

threatened. "Well, come on, then. You need to get packed, and then we need to get home before Remus has puppies."

Entering the house again, Hermione volunteered to help Harry gather his belongings together, not that she thought there would be many. When she was helping Harry gather his clothes, he tapped her on the shoulder. "Yes?"

He squirmed a little as he gathered his clothes from the rest of the laundry. "I was... I was just wondering why you lied earlier-- about Dudley hurting you."

Hermione snorted. "I wouldn't have lied if I had known Sirius would be happy about it. I thought I was keeping you out of trouble by making it seem like nothing happened. It didn't work out like that."

"You were going to lie for me?" He asked, his quiet voice awed.

She set her hand on her shoulder. "Of course I would Harry. You're my *friend*. I'd do anything to help you." *I've done just about everything--I've lied, stolen, led overgrown toads into the Forbidden Forest...the list goes on*, she added silently. She looked down at what she was holding, realized it was a pair of underwear with a brown stain, and tossed them back into the pile of laundry with a yelp.

"What is it?" Harry asked, turning to her when he heard her cry out. Unable to speak, Hermione pointed at what she had just tossed and shuddered. She couldn't even think about having touched it. Hiding a laugh, Harry grabbed her arm and led her out of the laundry room. "I'll show you where you can wash your hands."

Hermione had washed her hands three times before Harry finished finding all of his clothes. Walking down the stairs, Harry kept chuckling quietly, much to Hermione's dismay.

"What's so funny?" Sirius asked, his face amused.

"Nothing. Nothing is funny. We should go, don't you think? Papa Remus is probably very worried. We've been gone ever so long." Hermione said in one breath, noting that Dudley still hadn't returned.

Sirius gave her a look that said he knew she was lying, but he was going to let it go. "Alright then, we should go. Say goodbye to your aunt and uncle Harry."

"Bye," he said shortly to the petrified couple and turned back to Sirius. "Okay, I'm ready," Harry said excitedly. Hermione smiled-- she had never seen Harry so excited before, but then, he had always hidden his emotions as best he could.

If Sirius took note of the lack of goodbyes from the Dursleys, he said nothing of it. Instead, he guided them out the door, hailed the Knight Bus, and ushered the two children on before anyone could take notice. Beatrice was the conductor again, but remained professional this time-- though she did stare at them quite a bit.

At long last, they arrived at Grimmauld Place. Harry looked up at the building nervously. "This is home?"

"Yes. It's a little nicer on the inside. It's been unoccupied for a few years-- since my mother died-- so it's a little run down. We'll get it fixed up soon though," Sirius replied, taking Harry's small bag of oversized clothes.

Just as Sirius reached for the doorknob, the door swung open, revealing an anxious Remus. "You're finally back! I was afraid something may have happened to one of the kids."

"Something did, but that's a story for the dinner table. By the way, we need to get to Diagon Alley tomorrow-- Hermione needs wizarding clothes, and Harry needs clothes that actually fit." Sirius muttered something unflattering about the Dursleys and turned to Harry. "Come into the kitchen, and we'll introduce ourselves properly."

"Harmony is taking a nap, Hermione," Remus said. "Why don't you go get her?"

Hermione nodded and set off down the hallway to Harmony's room. Remus and Sirius had been kind enough to help her fix it up so that it was almost identical to her old room. She smiled as she looked around. She was glad she was living with them. It still hurt to think of her parents, but knowing that Harry was with her now, and knowing

that she could keep him from becoming the next Dark Lord soothed her. Harmony cooed as Hermione walked in, pulling her from her thoughts. "Hello, Harmony. Do you want to meet Harry? He's finally here." Hermione grinned as she lifted Harmony out of her crib. "Come on. Let's go visit him, okay?"

Holding Harmony in her arms, she walked to the kitchen. Glancing around, she found Harry sitting next to Sirius and across from Remus. She frowned. Harry did seem as happy as he had been earlier. In fact, he looked kind of sad. Thinking he was just uncomfortable being around people he didn't know, Hermione quickly took her seat beside him. "Harry, this is my sister Harmony. Harmony, this is my friend Harry." Harry looked surprised when he saw Harmony, but Hermione noticed he immediately seemed a bit happier.

Dinner was a pleasant affair. While Hermione alternated between taking bites of her own dinner and feeding her sister, Sirius and Remus told tales about Lily, James and the rest of the Marauders during their Hogwarts years as they ate. Some of the stories Hermione had heard before, some she hadn't. All in all, it was the most relaxed she had felt since the night of her parents' demise.

Once they were done with their meal, the subject matter turned darker. Sirius and Remus explained to Harry every dark twist in the story his aunt and uncle never told him. They told him about Voldemort, and the wizarding world's descent into dark times. They told him how his parents were betrayed by Peter Pettigrew. They told him how Sirius had been framed, and had spent the last five years in Azkaban. Sirius, Hermione knew, didn't want to tell Harry, but knew that he would resent being lied to when he did know the truth.

Harry had remained quiet throughout the explanation. He seemed unsure what to do with the information he had been given. In a gesture of comfort, Hermione set her hand over his. Looking at her, Harry smiled weakly. "I think I'm going to go to bed, Sirius, if it's alright."

His godfather nodded. "Of course, Harry, I understand there is a lot for you to think about. I had Kreacher-- he's my house elf, but he's

not very pleasant-- put your things in your room. Come with me, I'll show you where it is." Sirius said, standing.

"I think I'm going to go to bed too," Hermione said. "I'm rather tired myself. Do you want me to put Harmony to bed, Papa Remus?"

"No, I've got her," he said, wincing as she pulled his hair and giggled. "I'd hate to spoil her fun."

Hermione nodded, watching her sister play. "Well, goodnight everyone. I'll see you all in the morning," she smiled and turned away, heading down the hall to her room as Harry and Sirius walked behind her, talking.

Slipping into her room, Hermione shut the door behind her with a sigh. What a day! First a hectic morning-- she had shattered three dishes when she felt a bug crawling up her leg-- then cleaning followed by a quick lunch, and finally, removing Harry from the Dursleys.

Hermione frowned as she considered that no one had explained to Harry why he would have to go back to his aunt and uncle's house every summer for a few weeks. Not that she blamed them, of course-- most five year old wouldn't understand that the protection of their mother's sacrifice must be 'recharged' so to speak. So long as Harry knew that Privet Drive was technically his real home, he was safe. The question was, how could they convince Harry that Number 4 Privet Drive was his real home? She pushed her thoughts away-- these were things to consider another time.

She looked around her room sadly. It was rather empty-- she couldn't have very many things in her room with her magic acting up like it was. All of her muggle books had to be kept in the Black Library after she accidentally made them fly around the room the night before. The night before last she had set her curtains on fire, and the night before that she had shattered her windows. And so, for her own safety, her room was barren. She felt a pang at the emptiness-- it certainly wasn't as if she meant to have nightmares. She shuddered as she considered her dreams-- they always involved the Dark Harry.

With a sigh Hermione opened the drawer in her desk. Inside she kept her secrets-- there was her journal and a locket that she had taken

from one of the glass cabinets on one of the upper floors. Both would have to be destroyed. The journal held too many secrets and was no longer needed-- she could now do wandless magic, and all of her previous plans meant nothing now-- the journal was dangerous to keep. Sentimentality stayed her hand-- the journal was a gift from Uncle Jack. *What must be done, must be done*, she reminded herself resolutely. Shaking her head, Hermione promised herself she would destroy it the next time she could do so without raising suspicion.

The locket... the locket was a Horcrux, and had to be destroyed. She had pondered how to go about it. One idea had been to write a letter to Dumbledore, telling him that Voldemort had five Horcruxes to be destroyed or he would rise again. She would tell him that Slytherin's ring was in the Gaunt House, that Ravenclaw's bracelet was in Borgin and Burkes, hidden in the back and priced at just under one million galleons, and that Hufflepuff's cup was in the orphanage where Riddle spent his youth. The locket she would send with the letter. The journal in Malfoy's possession would have to wait.

But letters could be traced, and no one could be allowed to question her.

She would have to find another way. It was the perfect plan-- if the Horcruxes were destroyed, Voldemort would never rise. If Voldemort didn't rise, Harry wouldn't lose those he loved. If Harry never lost those he loved, he wouldn't become the Dark Harry that haunted her dreams. Hermione lay down on her bed, exhausted yet dreading the dreams sleep would bring.

Harry's Point Of View

Harry walked with Sirius, watching Hermione as she stepped through her bedroom door. "Sirius," he asked suddenly, walking past her door. "Where is Hermione's mother? I know your friend Remus is Hermione's dad, but where is her mother?"

Sirius froze. "She didn't tell you?" He asked quietly. Puzzled, Harry shook his head no. With a heavy sigh, Sirius knelt down. "Well, Little Prongs, it's a sad story. You see, Remus isn't Hermione's father-- he's her guardian, kind of like your aunt and uncle were your guardians. Hermione's parents, well, they died a few days ago." Harry

stared at Sirius, his eyes wide. "It's not my place to say what happened, really, so I'll leave that to her to tell you when she's ready, but... things were pretty bad for her-- only Hermione, her sister Harmony, and her dog Horace survived."

Harry stood quietly, unable to speak. Sweet Hermione was an orphan like he was? It wasn't right, it wasn't fair! Neither of them had done anything wrong. Why did things like this have to happen to them? Weren't these things supposed to happen to bad people who deserved it?

"Harry," Sirius said softly and pointed to a door. "This is your room. You've had a big day, and you have another big day tomorrow-- we need to get you some clothes. Why don't you go to sleep? You'll need your strength."

Harry nodded numbly and walked into the room his godfather showed him. "Harry?" The young wizard turned to his godfather. Pulling Harry into a tight embrace, he whispered, "I'm sorry I wasn't there for you all those years ago. I'm going to make it up to you, Little Prongs, I promise."

Smiling, Harry replied, "thank you. Thank you for everything, Sirius."

Sirius smiled in return. "Goodnight."

"G'night." Harry watched Sirius leave then looked around his new room-- his very own room! It was empty for the most part, but he had only been there for a few hours, so he wasn't upset. Still, he had a bed, a dresser, and a nightstand-- he had never had any of these things before.

Harry sat down on his bed-- his very own bed!-- and thought about his day. It had started out horrible, since he had burned breakfast and hadn't been allowed to eat. Then he had chores, a small lunch, followed by more chores. He had thought his day was only going to get worse.

Then his salvation had come.

He had peeked out the window when there was a knock at the door. Harry had never been allowed to meet anyone, and he so dearly wanted to see someone new. The girl was the first person he had seen. He hadn't had time to look at the man-- the man he would later learn was his godfather-- because the girl had looked at him and he ducked away.

Uncle Vernon had caught him peeking and locked him in his cupboard. Harry had thought he would be in there for ages for breaking the rules. But then he had heard something break and then a girl's voice. He liked her voice, it was nothing like Aunt Petunia's-- Aunt Petunia screeched more than she talked.

Restless, Harry stood up and walked to the window. It scared him how much Hermione had come to mean to him in such a short amount of time. She was his first everything. She was the first witch he had seen. She was the first person to smile, really smile at him. She was the first person to offer her hand and help him. She was the first person to hug him, and the only person who had ever kissed him. She was the first person ever who was willing to lie for him. More importantly, she was his first friend, and that made her the most important person in the world, so far as Harry was concerned. Besides, she was the one who caught Peter Pettigrew, so she was the one to free Sirius, and if she freed Sirius, that meant she had freed him, too!

He chuckled as he remembered asking her if she was his sister. No, Hermione would never be his sister. She was much better than that. Harmony could be his sister, but never Hermione. He'd seen what sisters were like on the television on those rare occasions when he could watch for a few moments before he was noticed. Hermione was nothing like a sister.

Shaking his head, Harry walked back to his bed. He had been upset earlier when he was getting his clothes. He thought Hermione had lied to protect Dudley, that Hermione had realized he really was a freak and that it wasn't good to be his friend. Now he knew that Hermione had lied for *him*. Hermione didn't care about Dudley, she cared about *him*.

He had been upset again when Moony had mentioned someone named Harmony. Harry didn't want Hermione to be friends with someone else-- he was afraid she would like them better than him, and tell him she didn't want to be his friend anymore. But then he found out that Harmony was Hermione's sister, and that made him feel better.

Now he felt bad for not liking Harmony. She was Hermione's sister, after all, so she couldn't be that bad, and she and the dog Horace were all Hermione had left. He was glad Remus was her guardian-- he wouldn't lock her in a cupboard, and it would have been horrible if she had been locked in a cupboard like he was! Harry frowned. He didn't like that idea.

Harry began to pace. He didn't like the idea of anyone hurting Hermione in any way. She was his best friend, and she was very special. No, he didn't like the idea of Hermione getting hurt at all. He had never been as angry as he had been earlier when Dudley pushed Hermione and pulled her hair. He had never been so angry that he hit someone until today. And he knew, without a doubt, that if anyone hurt his friend, his very first friend, that he would hurt them.

Harry nodded to himself and got into bed, grinning to himself as he snuggled into his sheets in his bed in his room. Who was that wizard Sirius and Remus kept mentioning? Merlin? Yes, that was the name. Merlin have mercy on anyone who hurt his Hermione. He certainly wouldn't.

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A/N: This chapter was inspired by the Monster in Harry's chest. No, Harry is not evil. Let me explain before you flame me. Yes, this Harry is...creepy...for lack of a better word, but you have to understand where *he's* coming from. This Harry has felt abandoned all of his life. Then along comes Hermione, who willingly accepts and likes him for who he is. That makes her important to him, and he wants to protect her. I'll go a bit more in depth with this concept in the next chapter.

Oh, how was my first shot at writing a five year old boy? I was trying to make his thought patterns be like a five year old kid's would, but I'm not sure how I did. Not too badly, I hope.

There are a few issues I would like to address. Yes, Malfoy wanted custody of Hermione for a less than noble reason-- you'll see what that is in a few chapters. There is also a good reason I gave Remus custody of Hermione-- if Sirius were her guardian, that would make her and Harry a little too close to being siblings for my taste.

Anyways, thanks to everyone who reviewed! I hope you enjoyed reading this chapter, and please review!

Cheers,

Madm05

Chapter Four: Alarm

Sirius padded into the kitchen, unsurprised by the sight of his good friend sitting at the table, playing with Harmony and trying to get her to eat. "You would think Harmony would cry more, given all of the changes she's been through recently." Sirius said.

Remus looked up. "Well, Hermione said she's a social butterfly, so I'm not concerned about Harmony. Hermione, on the other hand, is causing me a great deal of worry."

Sirius frowned. "She seems like she's doing okay to me."

"That's just it, she's doing too well," Remus pinched the bridge of his nose. "Six days, Padfoot, her parents died six days ago, and she hasn't mourned them. She hasn't cried since I found her in that broom closet. She's been so busy helping us with the house and she seems so normal that you forget she just lost every adult in her life. And she knows things," Remus leaned back. "She knows things six year olds aren't supposed to know."

Sirius frowned as sat next to his old friend. "What do you mean? I know she's smarter than, well, most adults I've met, but I thought you explained that, with her ability to read and remember and all. That would make her pretty smart."

"That's just it, she knows things that you can't find in books!" Remus ran his fingers through his hair. "There are so many things that don't add up, so many inconsistencies." He leaned forward. "For instance, how does she know Harmony is a social butterfly, how does she know that her sister can adjust to any setting? Harmony isn't even a year old!

"And that's not all. Do you remember the Wizengamot Hearing? I've seen adults called up to testify that didn't answer as completely as she did. Usually, the Wizengamot has to ask several questions in order to get the whole story. They asked Hermione one question--they asked her what happened. I felt like she was giving a history report! What six year old can tell you about the death of her parents and discovering a criminal on accident like she did? It doesn't make sense."

"Then there's Malfoy. She was terrified of him at the Hearing," Sirius added thoughtfully. "But she shouldn't have been, now that I think on it. She didn't know him, and he was pretty much offering to buy her anything she wanted. We know he's evil, but she doesn't. Yet she knew he was a man to feared."

"And the comment that Toad Woman said. What was her name? Umbrella? She made a comment on Purebloods and Muggleborns. I'm almost positive Hermione knew she was being insulted," Sirius said, warming to the topic. "She's a Muggleborn-- the Ministry showed everyone records that proved it at the Hearing-- so she shouldn't have known about the controversy over Purebloods and Muggleborns."

"You see? There are so many things that don't fit," Remus snorted. "If I didn't know any better, I'd say she was from the future."

Sirius paused and looked deep in thought. "What if she is, Moony? I mean, of course she's not from the future, but, what if she can see the future? It would explain a lot of things." He glanced around and leaned closer. "Isn't it strange the way she acts as if she knows us? And those stories we were telling Harry last night-- didn't it seem strange to you that she would sometimes smile right before we told something funny?"

"On top of that, I told you about what happened at the Dursleys-- Hermione knew Harry was in that cupboard. My animagus form is a dog, Moony, I have better hearing and sense of smell than most people-- I didn't know he was in there." Sirius gave his friend a penetrating look. "If Hermione is a Seer, that would explain it. If that's true, I guess it's a good thing you have custody, isn't it? Can you imagine what Malfoy would have done to her? "

"So it is very probable that Hermione has to deal with being a Seer on top of everything else that has happened." He began to massage his temples. "Truthfully, I was relieved when she ran out of the room, and I wish she would start crying-- any reaction at all is better than not reacting."

Harmony began to fuss, getting Remus' attention. "I'm sorry, Harmony, you're still hungry, aren't you?" He said, continuing in his task. "Well, at least Hermione has Harry now."

"You're not going to convince a pair of kids they should get married, are you Moony?" Sirius said, getting up and hunting for something to eat. "They are a bit young, after all, don't you think?"

Remus snorted. "I never said anything about marriage, Padfoot. I'm just saying that they've become fast friends," he said, giving his friend a look. "You know, we need to get out to Diagon Alley. We need food and the kids need some clothes."

"I agree on all counts." Sirius said, his eyes roaming the cabinets in search of food. "Especially in regards to Harry and Hermione. It's a bit scary to me, actually, how Harry acts around her. Did it seem to you like he wasn't happy unless she was close by? Where are the biscuits?"

"They're in the left cabinet, and you shouldn't be eating them this early-- you'll set a bad example for the children." Remus grinned as his friend raised his hands in surrender and went in search of something else to eat. "And yes, I did notice how he acted. I'm not sure whether I'm worried or pleased, myself."

"I can understand you being worried-- the way he acted last night was just this side of obsessive-- but how can you be pleased?" Sirius asked, stopping his hunt.

Remus took a drink from his cup. "Because now they are not alone. Think, Padfoot, I know you can. They are two children who are orphaned at a young age, and both with extraordinary powers. Harry defeated Voldemort and Hermione can do wandless magic, and that makes them very different from everyone, it makes them different from muggle-kind and wizarding-kind.

"Then, from what you've told me of Harry's family and their treatment of him, I don't think he had many friends until he met Hermione-- a girl his age who was willing to accept him, baggy clothes and cruel cousin and all. As for Hermione, well, from what I've seen, she prefers the company of books to people. I'm speaking as a bookworm

myself now, so I know that she uses her books as a shield. She probably wasn't anymore accepted than Harry was, until she met Harry himself.

"So you see, Padfoot, I would be more concerned for them both if they weren't friends. Yes, I am concerned that Harry is a bit too attached to Hermione considering they've only just met," he admitted, "but another part of me is glad they have found acceptance in each other. He's not obsessive, he's protective. Those two will either be as close as any brother and sister, or, they'll be as close as Lily and James, if you catch my meaning." Remus looked pensive for a moment. "It's as if they're Kindred Spirits."

"Kindred Spirits," Sirius nodded thoughtfully. "I hadn't looked at it like that. I'm still--" He was cut off by two owls tapping at the window. Sirius stood and opened the window, allowing the owls waiting outside to fly in. The first owl, holding one envelope, flew to Remus while the other owl, holding three envelopes, flew to Sirius.

"Well, the Ministry knows that Harry is here," Sirius said glancing at the three letters then opening the one addressed to him, "I guess we'll be going out today. It seems the Ministry has finally decided what to give me as compensation for Azkaban. There's to be a ceremony tomorrow, where I'm to receive it. There's a letter for Harry and another for Hermione, I'm guessing theirs say the same. The three of us are allowed to take a guest, so I'm sure we'll be able to find a way for you and Harmony to come along, unless you got a letter as well?"

"I did, but my letter is from Gringotts. Both the girls and I have been added to your Gringotts account and have full access. Are you sure this is wise, Sirius? They are children, and the Black family fortune is very large..."

"Relax Moony. I'm sure they'll be very responsible." Remus snorted into his cup. "Actually, I'm not telling them." Sirius admitted with a grin. "Well Moony, I'm going to wake Harry and Hermione up and have them get ready so we can go out for a while-- Harry is in desperate need of clothes that fit, but all of the kids need wizarding robes. Why don't you clean up Harmony?"

--Hermione's Point Of View--

Hermione lay in bed, unwilling to open her eyes. It was a ritual she was accustomed to. She would lay in bed with her eyes closed and pretend that if she opened them, she would be in her old room and that at any minute, her parents were going to call her down for breakfast.

She rolled over and covered her head with her pillow. For a brief moment, it seemed as if she could block out all of her memories with the darkness. She could forget her parents deaths, she could forget about her strange new abilities.

For her guardian's sake, she pretended that she couldn't feel the magic wards placed on her room that alerted Remus when her magic acted up. She pretended that she didn't know he came into her room each night to fix the damage she had done. Last night he had turned the mist she had created back into the curtains they were before. Hermione had feigned slumber.

Hermione shifted again. Having wandless magic was one thing, having some sort of connection to magic itself was another. She could feel a tingle whenever something magical was near. It had developed after the disaster in the Wizengamot, thankfully. It was nice to have that sort of warning, but it was horrible when she was around too much magic. Just sitting in a room with a few magical objects was enough to make her twitch.

Too restless to sleep, Hermione pulled herself out of bed and got dressed for the day. Remus and Sirius had said they were going to Diagon Alley today to get robes for her, Harry, and Harmony. Her spirits lifted a little. Maybe she could persuade Sirius and Remus to buy Hedwig and Crookshanks. It would be lovely to have Crookshanks to comfort her.

Opening her door, Hermione found Sirius standing outside, his hand raised to knock. "Well, you're awake! That's makes things easier. Moony and I will be taking all of you out today, so run down and get yourself a quick breakfast while I wake Harry. We'll be leaving shortly."

Hermione nodded and watched as Sirius walked down the hallway to Harry's room with a slight bounce in his step. Grinning, she walked down to the kitchen. Seeing Sirius and Harry so happy now was almost worth... Hermione shook her head and stepped into the kitchen. Smiling at Remus as he washed Harmony's face, Hermione set about making a quick breakfast of toast for herself and Harry.

A few minutes later, Harry came tumbling into the kitchen. "I'm so sorry, I'll never oversleep again, I promise. I didn't mean to not wake up in time to make breakfast, and I really am--"

"Harry! It's okay. Really. Look, I made you some toast-- no butter, just like you like it." Hermione said with a small smile, handing him a small stack.

Harry looked at her in awe. "How did you know I don't like butter on my toast?"

Hermione laughed nervously, not seeing the shared look between Sirius and Remus. "Lucky guess, that's all!" She breathed a sigh of relief when Harry accepted her answer with a smile and a nod as he began to eat his breakfast. "So, how will we be getting to Diagon Alley?" She asked Remus.

"We'll be flooing over. Don't worry, we'll show you how it's done," he said reassuringly. "I'll take Harmony, so we'll go first. You'll watch Harry and Hermione, won't you Padfoot?" Sirius nodded his agreement and stood. "Well then, let's go."

Standing before the fireplace in the family room, Remus took a pinch of floo powder and tossed it into the fire. "Now watch closely you two," he said, wrapping his arms protectively around Harmony as she squirmed, trying to look at the roaring green flames. "Diagon Alley!" Remus shouted, stepping into the flames.

"Right, now, you go next Little Prongs. I'm sure you don't need me to carry you-- I'd been flooing by myself by the time I was four. Just throw some of the powder into the fire, wait for it to turn green, step in and say Diagon Alley, okay?" Sirius said, patting Harry on the back and gesturing towards the fire. "Just remember to keep your eyes

closed because of the soot, and don't fidget, or you'll fall out of some old hag's fireplace, alright? Good."

Hermione watched as Harry swallowed nervously and grabbed a pinch of powder with shaking hands. Before he even threw the floo powder into the fire, she knew there was going to be a problem. He threw the powder and stepped into the green flames. "D-Dia-gon Alley!" Harry coughed. Hearing his mispronunciation, Hermione leapt into the emerald fire, hugging Harry, the floo taking her with him when he was whisked away.

Once the spinning stopped, Hermione and Harry tumbled out of the fireplace in a heap. Looking around, Hermione recognized Borgin and Burkes. An intense tingling shot through her-- she had forgotten how she reacted when she was near magical objects. Then another jolt of a very different sort shot through her-- if she were at Borgin and Burkes, then she could get the Ravenclaw Horcrux! The bracelet of Rowena Ravenclaw was so close at hand, and if she could only get her hands on it, it would be one less task for her to undertake later.

In the back of her mind she wondered if the Divine Beings had a hand in this. *Probably not*, she thought. *They didn't help when my parents...they haven't helped me so far, I can't see why they would help me now.*

"Hermione, look at this hand over here! It's all shriveled and stuff-- it looks like a mummy hand!" Harry said excitedly peering into a glass case. "Wow! Look at those masks, it feels like they're staring at me or something, do you feel it?"

Hermione smiled slightly as Harry talked animatedly about the strange objects through out the store. He didn't seem to notice Hermione walking slowly to the back of the dingy building. She could see it, sitting in a display case for all the world to see, if only anyone would look. She glance around to be sure no one was in the room other than Harry. *I'd do anything for you Harry. I've lied and I've stolen, and I'll steal again for you.* Nervously licking her lips, Hermione tentatively reached out and set her hand on the glass.

Glancing to check on Harry, she focused on summoning the bracelet to her. Focusing her magic and ignoring the tingling from all of the

magic around her, Hermione thought of everything that had gone wrong in her life, blaming it all on the Horcruxes. Nothing happened. She couldn't fail, not in this. She didn't know when she would be able to return to Borgin and Burkes to get the Horcrux. Slowly, the bracelet rose from the cushion it lay on and hovered in mid air. Anger swelled in her chest. She watched as part of the glass began to melt away. Hermione snatched the bracelet and shoved it into her pocket as she turned away, stepping quickly towards Harry.

"I think we should go, Harry. Sirius and Papa Remus won't be happy if they find out we're here. This doesn't seem like a very good place to be. They're probably terribly worried as well." Hermione said, walking to the door.

Harry nodded anxiously, walking away from a blood stained pack of playing cards. "Yes, we should go. I don't like this place." The young boy swallowed nervously as she came closer, his eyes darting around.

Hermione grabbed his hand in a comforting gesture and immediately felt him relax. "This way," she said, leading him into the dark of Knockturn Alley.

Hearing the jingle of the bell, Mr. Burke stepped out of his office and looked around. "Kids these days, always causing trouble for hardworking wizards," he sneered, turning back into his office. He never notice the empty case that once held the bracelet of Rowena Ravenclaw.

Fighting the dizziness that threatened to overcome her, Hermione resolutely led Harry down the path she knew led to Diagon Alley. "Well, look what we have here," a voice rasped from one of the many corners in Knockturn Alley.

"Looks like quite a prize to me, Archie. It looks like we caught ourselves Harry The Boy Who Lived Potter and Hermione The Wandless Witch Granger. Yes, we caught quite the prize indeed," another voice echoed ominously around them.

Harry defiantly positioned himself in front of Hermione. "I'm warning you, you'd better stay away from us." Hermione shuddered. The Dark Harry had used that tone when he vowed to find her killer.

The second voice laughed, as two forms came into view. The first was an old man with a scraggly beard and missing teeth, the second was a an old woman, bent and seemingly frail. "Listen to the little lion's roar. Fierce, isn't he?" The man sneered with a mocking grin to his companion.

"Wotcher," a third, female, voice said. "You fine people wouldn't be scaring these kids, now, would you?" An old woman with a large hooked nose and hairy mole on her chin materialized behind Harry and Hermione. "Because that's just not nice, them being kids and all." She watched at the pair melted back into the shadows and looked down before shifting her form. Hermione felt a wave of relief at the sight of Tonks. "I don't suppose there is a good reason you two are wondering around a place like this, is there?"

"There was an accident when we were flooing to Diagon Alley," Hermione said calmly, hoping to hide her nervousness. Had the aurors been called in to investigate the missing bracelet already? She crossed her fingers and prayed they hadn't. "It's a bit difficult to talk clearly with hot ash in your mouth." *There*, she thought, seeing Harry's grateful look. *She doesn't need to know that Harry had the accident, so now Harry won't have to feel too embarrassed about it.*

Tonks stared at them a moment before nodding. "Well, let's go find your guardians. This isn't a very safe place for anyone, let alone a couple of kids like you," she said, guiding them out of the darkened alley. "I'm sure they're worried about you."

Hermione breathed a sigh of relief-- so the aurors hadn't been alerted about the stolen bracelet from Borgin and Burkes. Soon they would be out of Knockturn Alley, and if she could only make it home with out getting caught, she could begin planning how the get the next Horcrux.

As the trio neared the entrance to Diagon Alley, Remus came barreling right at them. Harry grabbed Hermione's arm and pulled her off to one side, using his body as a shield to protect her. Tonks had

no such shield. Remus ran right into her, knocking them both to the ground in a tangled heap.

"I have to tell you," Tonks said, her voice strained as she tried to get her breath back. "I prefer to be on top."

Remus flushed. Even the tips of his ears glowed red. "N-not in front of the children," he stammered, scrambling to his feet. He cleared his throat nervously. "I'm terribly sorry about that, I really am. I was looking for Harry and Hermione, you see, there was--"

"An accident with the floo, yes, I know. You know, if accidents with the floo like that one weren't so common, I would have reported you to the Ministry," she said as Remus paled. "Fortunately for you, I'm off duty, the Ministry is run by a bunch of idiots that would place the girls with a bunch of less than noble prats, and you're a friend of my favorite cousin," she added with a grin.

Remus was taken aback then looked at her intensely for a moment. "Little Dora? Is that really you?" He laughed and pulled her into a hug when she grinned. "I haven't seen you in ages!"

Tonks laughed. "I'm not that little anymore."

"So I see," he replied before coughing nervously. "Say, why don't you come with me and the kids? Sirius is watching Harmony and fighting off the attention of random witches at the Leaky Cauldron while I came here to look for Harry and Hermione-- I'm sure he'd love to see you again."

Tonks smiled. "Why not? I'm not doing anything at the moment. I have the day off from training, so I figured I'd walk around Knockturn Alley in my free time to see if anything suspicious is going on. That's how I stumbled on to the kids. It'll be nice to see Sirius and check on Hermione."

Hermione caught Harry's gaze and rolled her eyes. She knew he hated being talked about rather than being talked to as much as she did. Harry glanced at Tonks then gave Hermione a questioning look. She sighed-- she really didn't want to tell Harry about her parents, or about Tonks and the other aurors finding her just yet. Hermione tilted

her head slightly in an *I'll tell you later* look. Harry nodded in understanding. Despite her unwillingness to talk about the night her parents died, she loved how they could still talk to each other without actually speaking, even when they were still kids.

"So," Remus began, "what have you been up to all this time Dora? We haven't talked in quite some time, not since..." He trailed off, shooting Harry a nervous glance.

"Yeah, I know," Tonks said, seeing the look he gave Harry. "It has been a long time. I'm in training to be an auror now, just started."

Hermione tuned out the conversation when she heard Harry breathe in sharply. Turning, she grinned at the look of amazement on his face as they entered Diagon Alley. It was hard to remember that, while she had been there several times, this Harry hadn't.

She struggled with a wave of dizziness that overcame her as she entered an area with much more magic to contend with. Knockturn Alley had very few stores, and even fewer frequenters, as it was an unsavory place to be seen. Diagon Alley, however, was filled with people and magical items. The abundance of magic was overwhelming, but Hermione fought to stay in control. It wouldn't help her situation if she suddenly fainted.

She focused on Harry's voice as he pointed out everything around them, pushing away the intense, constant tingling. *Why do things like this always happen to me? The Time-Turner fiasco, half of the Ravenclaws wouldn't come near me because of what my spelled the parchment did to Marietta Edgecomb in the D.A., then I just had to teach myself wandless magic, and now I'm stuck feeling magic all the time. Damn my academic drive!*

Hermione was relieved when the Leaky Cauldron came into view-- at least there she would only have to contend with other witches and wizards. She took a moment to look around and realized she was being stared at. Listening carefully, she could hear whispers of "that's Harry Potter and Hermione Granger" and "the Boy Who Lived and the Wandless Witch!" Hermione frowned. She didn't like the attention she and Harry were drawing.

Entering the Leaky Cauldron, Hermione felt no relief. While the tingling wasn't nearly as intense as before, there were even more people staring at her and Harry. "Bless my soul!" Tom shouted merrily, turning heads in their direction. "It's Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived and Hermione Granger, the Wandless Witch! Welcome, welcome! Please, come in, sit, eat, drink! Can I get you anything?" He asked excitedly. "It's an honor, it truly is!"

As people began to swarm around them, trying to shake their hands, Hermione tried to make herself smaller. Was this what Harry dealt with everyday? She had known he was famous, and that everyone on the side of light all but worshipped him, but she had never seen anything quite like this. Perhaps it was because Voldemort had only fallen a little under five years ago. There would certainly be quite the difference if Harry was introduced five years earlier than he had been in the first reality.

Harry, she noticed, seemed mortified. "Hermione," he whispered shakily, "how do they know my name? I've never met these people before in my life!"

"You're famous, Harry, remember? If it makes you feel better, I had no idea I was famous either." Hermione said, grabbing his hand and squeezing gently. "I can't wait to go home." Harry nodded his agreement.

"My-My!" A voice shrieked.

"Excuse me, wizard with a baby, coming through!" Sirius' voice called out over the din as he elbowed his way over to them. "I have to tell you, Moony, I'm beginning to think this was a mistake. Next time we need clothes for the kids, I say we call a private tailor to the house. As for food, well, we can hire someone to get food, can't we?" He seemed desperate.

Tonks snorted. "Yeah, you would want to just hire someone. The poor kids would never get to have any fun then, being trapped inside all the time. Where's the fun in that?"

Sirius looked at her strangely. "Little Dora?" He asked. "Is that you?" Tonks rolled her eyes and nodded.

“Hey, you’re Remus Lupin right?” A witch Hermione didn’t know said as she approached the small group. “What do you say we get together sometime?” The witch wasn’t even looking at Remus-- she was staring at Hermione. “I’m sure I could help you with this adorable little girl.”

“First, there are two adorable little girls, and second, he’s not interested!” Tonks snapped, pushing the witch away. “You kids need robes, right? Well, let’s get to Madame Malkin’s and hopefully we’ll be able to have a conversation.”

“That sounds like a fantastic idea, Dora,” Sirius said, pushing another wizard away before he could attempt to shake Harry’s hand. He set his hand on Hermione’s shoulder. “I think we need to get out of here.” Hermione had never been so happy to hear anyone say that-- she was having a hard time standing up straight from the intense tingling all around her.

The group waded their way through the crowd and escaped to Madame Malkin’s. The trooped in and, to their relief, found it nearly empty. There was only an older woman talking with a clerk, and a young boy Hermione recognized as a younger Neville, looking at a set of robes nearby. Glad to see a friend, she walked over to him. “Hello, I’m Hermione Granger,” she said, smiling softly. As her back was to Harry, she never saw him scowling at Neville.

“H-Hermione Granger? The Hermione Granger?” He stammered.

Hermione paused. How did everyone, even Neville, know who she was? She’d only been a part of the wizarding world for a few days! “Yes,” she said, before looking over her shoulder. “This is my friend Harry,” she introduced the boys.

Harry calmly walked over and offered Neville his hand, his face an impassive mask. The Dark Harry had looked like that. Hermione shuddered. “Are you cold, Hermione?” Harry asked, looking at her with concern.

“A little,” she lied. “But I’ll be alright.” She looked around for a distraction. “Oh, you never did tell us your name,” she said.

"N-Neville Longbottom," he stuttered bashfully. "I know who you two are. Harry Potter and Hermione Granger, the two most famous kids ever." He looked at Harry's scar, then at Hermione and flushed.

"Neville, who are you--oh! Harry Potter and Hermione Granger, why I never thought I'd meet two such remarkable children. Little Neville is nothing extraordinary, I'm afraid, he doesn't seem to have much in the way of magic." The elderly witch said.

Hermione saw Neville wince and frowned. "I'm sure that if given half the chance, Neville could be a great wizard," she defended. Neville flushed again as the Longbottom Matron scrutinized Hermione.

"Hermione," Remus said as he walked up, Tonks, with Harmony now in her arms, and Sirius on either side. "Madame Malkin has an order she needs to finish up quickly, then she'll take your measurements. In the meantime, why don't you look around for robes you would like to have."

"Excuse me," the elderly woman asked, "but you are Mr. Lupin, are you not?" Remus nodded hesitantly. "Has she been Matched?" She asked, pointing to Hermione.

"Matched?" Harry asked, puzzled.

"Betrothed," the woman replied. Hermione felt the blood drain from her face. This could not be happening. "I think she would make a fine Match for Neville. She has enough spirit that she may be able to help the boy. If not, she certainly has the power to rejuvenate the Longbottom line."

"Well," Remus shifted, "I know wizarding betrothals are a long standing tradition--"

"She's Matched with me," Harry said, stepping forward.

The elder Longbottom sighed. "I thought that might be the case. Oh well, it was worth a try-- I had to at least ask. You never know about these things. Oh, there are our packages, Neville. Say goodbye to your friends, it's time to go." Neville, his face beet red, nodded and scurried after his grandmother.

Everyone was silent until, “James would be proud, Little Prongs. You skipped the dating part altogether and went straight to being engaged. Not even he managed that. But shouldn’t you have asked Hermione?”

Harry looked at Hermione. “What does ‘betrothed’ mean?”

Hermione sighed. What had he gotten them into now? Would he always get them into trouble? “Being betrothed is--”

“Brilliant!” Remus said, looking at Sirius. “We can tell people that the kids are betrothed, and then we won’t have to deal with offers from other families. The kids will be able to have some peace, at least in that respect.”

Sirius’ eyes lit up. “Then Malfoy wouldn’t be able to get Hermione that way. It doesn’t happen often, but sometimes the promised witch goes to live with her betrothed-- I wouldn’t be surprised if he tried it.”

“Just one problem,” Tonks said, bouncing Harmony in her arms. “Official betrothals are kept on record. People are going to find out it’s not real sooner or later.”

“What does betrothed mean?” Harry asked again.

The adults began to shift uncomfortably. Hermione rolled her eyes. “It’s a contract of sorts,” she said, turning to Harry. “If a man and a woman, or in our case, a boy and a girl are betrothed or engaged, it means they are going to be married. If we are married, then it means we agree to live together for the rest of our lives.” He stared blankly. “Your aunt and uncle were married.”

“Okay, I understand now,” Harry said, nodding.

“Are you sure she’s a kid?” Tonks whispered to Remus.

Harry continued. “So we’re already married then. I guess we can tell people that we’re not betrothed.”

“What?” Hermione choked. Did he say what she thought he said?

Tonks fought a grin as Sirius chuckled. "And how did you come to the conclusion that you're already married?"

"We live together," he shrugged. "And Hermione said that marriage is when you live together."

Hermione considered saying that both parties had to agree to live together for the rest of their lives, but decided not to speak. If she did, it may hurt him, and upsetting him wouldn't help her mission. This would have to be worked out later.

A woman cleared her throat behind them. "I do believe you wanted some robes for the little dears?" Madame Malkin asked, looking at Harry and Hermione.

Hermione was really getting tired of being gawked at for something she had no hand in. This must have been how Harry felt each time someone stared at his scar. She almost felt as if *she* should have a mark of some kind. One of the windows of the shop shattered. Madame Malkin gasped excitedly. "So it's true! You can do wandless magic!"

Before anyone could reply, Harry and Hermione were shuffled into separate rooms to have their measurements taken and be fitted for robes. It wasn't long before she and Harry both had several sets of robes and even a few pairs of undergarments, socks, and shoes. She and Harry had had to fight for the right to keep their old clothes-- it was disturbing that Madame Malkin wanted to keep their old muggle clothes. Judging from the look on Harry's face, he agreed. She couldn't leave fast enough.

"So, why don't we head over to the Magical Menagerie?" Sirius asked. "I can wait for my wand a bit longer, and it would be more convenient." Hearing no objections, he lead the way to the pet store. Hermione was ecstatic-- maybe she could convince them to buy Hedwig and Crookshanks for her and Harry. She walked quickly, hoping that the tingling would lessen when she entered the pet shop.

Stepping inside, Hermione went straight to the owls, looking for a certain snowy owl, and was shocked to find said owl was not there. There several snowy owls, but none of them had Hedwig's spot

pattern, nor did they have the intelligent gleam in their eyes. *Her egg probably hasn't even been laid, let alone hatched*, she realized dejectedly. When she checked the area where the cats were kept, she found that Crookshanks wasn't there.

In the end, Tonks picked out an Australian Masked owl, saying he would be useful for long trips and sending packages. He was a proud looking creature, but was very gentle and affectionate. Naming him, they decided, could wait until later, when they were home and away from the crowd.

Hermione focused on staying upright as they began the trek to Ollivander's. It seemed even more people had entered Diagon Alley, and the tingling had become almost too much to bear. "Are you alright Hermione?" Harry asked as she began to sway. Unable to speak, she nodded. Reaching out, she grabbed Harry to steady herself.

"Maybe she needs to rest," Remus said, lifting her into his arms. "We'd better get to Ollivander's and quick."

Hermione nodded absently. Yes, she thought, *Ollivander's. Then I can get away from all of these people*. She was vaguely aware of Remus walking faster to reach Ollivander's as spots danced before her eyes. The tingling throughout her body was so strong it was hard to move her arms and legs.

Soon they entered Ollivander's, but Hermione's relief was short lived. She had forgotten that there were hundreds and hundreds of magic wands crammed into one tiny room, combined with the magic of any wizards present. The tingling only intensified and her world faded to black.

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A/N: I don't really have anything to say here, except thanks to everyone who reviewed last time. I hope you all enjoyed reading this chapter, I certainly had fun writing it. Please review!

Cheers,

Madm05

Chapter Five: Magic

Harry stared dismally at his hands. He was in Hermione's room, sitting in a chair beside her bed. It was strange to think her room was as empty as his-- he had thought there would be more in her room, since there was a lot in Harmony's. Her only toy was a stuffed blue dog, though. The problem, he knew, was Hermione couldn't control her magic as well as he had thought. He understood that-- he couldn't always control his magic either. All sorts of strange things happened to him that he hadn't understood until Hermione had told him he was a wizard. But now something was wrong with his Hermione, and nobody knew what it was, not even the head-mister that Sirius and Remus and Dora had sent for.

"I've never heard of anything like this in the muggle or wizarding world," Remus said anxiously. "I can't find a cause whenever I cast diagnostic spells. Surely there must be some reason for this, headmaster."

"I am afraid, Remus, that I cannot say what is causing this for sure until our young witch awakens. I have my suspicions of course, but they may very well be the ramblings of an old man. There is nothing we can do but speculate. Until young Hermione wakes, perhaps we should discuss certain matters in the kitchen." He said, giving Sirius a significant look. "Harry?" He called, making the young wizard look up. "Will you call for us when your friend wakes?"

Harry felt his heart lift a little when the head-mister called Hermione his friend. "Yes sir, I will," he said formally. He watched them go then turned back to Hermione, thinking as he watched her breathe steadily.

The day had been so wonderful at the start. He had been so afraid when he woke up that he was going to be in trouble for not making breakfast. That had changed when his Hermione had saved the day and gave him toast! Toast! No one had ever made him breakfast before, but Hermione did, and she even knew that he didn't like butter!

When he had gotten ash in his mouth when he was flooing to Diagon Alley, Hermione had jumped in with him so that he wouldn't be alone. He liked that. He liked that she didn't abandon him. It made her even

more special, because no one else would have done that for him, but she had gone with him into that scary place with the cards with blood on them.

Tonks had been nice, even though he didn't know her. He hadn't liked it when the people were staring at him and constantly trying to shake his hand. He didn't like it when they were crowding around Hermione either. He had been relieved when they entered the clothes store, but then it had gotten worse. Hermione had smiled at another boy. Harry hadn't liked that at all-- what if Hermione found a new friend, and didn't want to be his anymore? He had been so angry that he had wanted to hit that boy like he had hit Dudley. Hermione was his friend, *his*! He didn't want her to leave him, and he certainly didn't want to share her with some boy named Neville Longbottom. It was a dumb name anyway. He didn't want to share her with anyone.

And he had been so worried when the old woman wanted to Match his Hermione with that Neville boy. What if they took her away from him? So he stepped forward and said that Hermione was Matched with him. Everyone had been shocked, and he was afraid that he had done something bad. What if he had done something wrong, and it made Hermione hate him? But he didn't like the idea of her being betrothed to Neville and rejubilating the Longbottom line, whatever that meant, and he had to do something. Hermione was his Hermione, after all.

But that didn't matter it seemed. Being Matched meant being betrothed, and being betrothed meant that you were going to be married. He didn't understand why everyone had acted strangely when he said he and Hermione were married-- they were living together, just like his aunt and uncle. He wondered if he and Hermione would have to share a room since they were married, like his aunt and uncle did. That would be nice. Then he could talk to her whenever he wanted. He liked that idea a lot. Harry decided to talk to her about it later when she was feeling better.

Maybe he should make her some soup. Aunt Petunia always made Dudley soup when he was sick. But then, Hermione was still sleeping, and soup couldn't help her if she was sleeping. Harry frowned. He wanted to help Hermione. It bothered him that he couldn't think of

way to make everything better. The string he was toying with suddenly turned into a flower. Maybe that would make her feel better. He set the flower on her nightstand. Hermione would have to wake up first.

Harry sighed heavily, and reached out to grasp Hermione's hand in his, waiting patiently for his Hermione to wake up.

--In The Kitchen--

Sirius led the way to the kitchen, Remus walking beside the headmaster and Dora holding little Harmony in her arms. It was strange how they had all become a family so quickly. Perhaps, Sirius thought, he would have a family photo taken of them all. He was sure he could convince his cousin to have her picture taken along with the rest of them. Maybe he could even work in a way for Horace to be in the photo as well.

"Now can you tell us what you think is wrong with Hermione?" Remus began as they took their seats. "Is it serious? Is that why you wanted to leave the room? So Harry couldn't hear?"

Professor Dumbledore stroked his beard. "While I have no doubts that young Hermione's situation is very serious, that is not why I wished to speak with you. Actually, I had plans to come and speak to you tomorrow, but all things considered, today is better." He turned to Sirius. "I'm afraid that Harry cannot live here."

"And just why is that?" He snapped angrily. "Do you have any idea how those muggles treated him? Like the Malfoys treat a house elf, that's how! I'm not sending him back to that, that, prison!"

Dumbledore sighed. "No, I admit that I do not know what has passed between Harry and his family--"

"You call those people his family? More like slave drivers!" Sirius snarled, leaping to his feet. Tonks and Remus remained quiet, watching the exchange closely.

"It is for his own protection!" Dumbledore interrupted firmly then sighed. "Sit down, Sirius, and I will explain to you just why Harry must

consider the Dursley residence his home.” Sirius reluctantly sat down as the headmaster turned to Tonks. “Perhaps, Nymphadora, you should put the younger Miss Granger to bed for now.”

Tonks looked ready to argue, but Sirius spoke first. “I think my cousin can hear anything you have to say.” He said darkly. “And I don’t think an eight month old baby will remember anything we say.”

Dumbledore sighed again but nodded. “Very well. The evening Voldemort killed the Potters, Lily sacrificed herself for Harry, and in so doing, she invoked the most ancient and primal of magics. She invoked the power of love.” Those gathered leaned closer, drawn in to what Dumbledore was telling them.

“Lily’s sacrifice, because it was so pure, created sort of shield, more specifically, it created a blood ward. In order for this ward to offer Harry protection, he must be near those of his blood, his aunt to be precise. What’s more, is he must think of the Dursley residence as his home.” Dumbledore concluded.

“What does he need the protection for?” Tonks asked. “Isn’t You-Know- Who dead? He shouldn’t need it, right?”

The headmaster shook his head sadly. “Do you truly believe, young Nymphadora, that Voldemort is well and truly gone? Who knows what lengths he went to in order to prevent his demise. No, he is still out there, I think, waiting patiently for the time when he can rise again.” The others shuddered. “Now do you understand why he must return to the Dursleys?”

Remus frowned. “How do these blood wards give him protection?”

Dumbledore shook his head sadly. “That I cannot say. Not much is known about blood wards, I know only that it will protect him in some way.”

Sirius grumbled under his breath, obviously not believing the headmaster’s words. “Then how do you know they really exist?” He demanded defiantly.

“Sirius,” Dumbledore said solemnly, “are you willing to risk Harry’s life if they do exist? Are you willing to keep him here knowing that it very well may kill him later?”

“What about Hogwarts?” Remus interrupted. “Harry will attend Hogwarts when he’s eleven, won’t he?”

Dumbledore steeped his fingers and looked thoughtful. “Yes. Indeed, Harry will attend Hogwarts when he is of age.”

“So what if we treat this like school?” Remus asked.

“Yeah, we were planning on doing it anyways, for Hermione,” Sirius added. “We talked to her about working with her on controlling her magic and giving her typical lessons that pureblood children receive. If we can turn this into school for him, would that work? Hermione is quite advanced, but Harry can still learn reading, writing, arithmetic and the like.”

“That may very well work. Lemon Drop? No?” He shrugged and popped the sweet into his mouth. “Now, as to your suggestion, yes, it could work. You would actually have to have a school, mind. Perhaps you could start a school for all children who need to receive the typical wizarding education?”

“There are many less than wealthy wizarding families that cannot provide such an education, and would be willing to pay a small fee for you to provide it. The Weasleys, for instance, are able to provide only half of a wizarding education for their children. Amelia Bones, I know, had trouble with finding time for her young niece, Susan I believe. Then there are many children with only one wizarding parent who often do not get an education such as this.” He offered. “I’m sure you could find others willing to help you teach.”

“I’d help,” Tonks added. “I have training most of the time, but when I’m off I wouldn’t mind coming over and helping with the kids.”

“And we’ve got the rooms for it, if parents want us to board the kids.” Sirius grinned.

"We don't even have to keep them the whole time-- we could probably send them home on the weekends if they wanted too." Remus said. "It would be great for the kids, too. They'd get to meet more kids their age. Then maybe Harry would be quite as... ah... possessive of Hermione."

"Oh? Harry is possessive of Hermione?" Dumbledore asked with a small frown. "There is nothing to be concerned about I hope."

Sirius chuckled. "Not at the moment, though he is convinced he's married to her. We haven't figured out how to tell him he's not." Dumbledore's eyebrows vanished in his hairline. Sirius then launched into the humorous tale of how Harry came to the conclusion of being married to Hermione.

Dumbledore chuckled and cleared his throat. "It is something to look into. As you know, Lucius may very well be able to get custody over her if he can find a way to Match her with his son. If they do not wish to be married, you can cancel the engagement later, when you are not in as much danger of losing Hermione." He changed the topic. "So, are you decided then? You are going to open a school here?"

Sirius nodded. "We about have to, if we want to keep Harry. Besides, we need to help Hermione get control over her magic. I'm getting tired of repairing my windows every time something takes her by surprise."

The headmaster frowned. "Does her magic act up often?"

Remus nodded. "She has nightmares every night and always does something. So far, she sent her books flying around her room, shattered her windows, set her curtains on fire, and last night she turned her curtains into some sort of mist." He sighed heavily. "And that's while she's asleep. We've spelled her windows to be unbreakable, and now it seems we're going to have to put even more charms on just about everything, so she doesn't break or transfigure something."

"I wonder," Dumbledore said absently. "I wonder if, no, it's unheard of. Surely she couldn't have done it."

"Done what?" Remus asked.

"She's awake!" Harry shouted, barreling into the kitchen. He climbed onto the counter, grabbed an empty glass and filled it with water. "Hermione! She's awake!" He said, turning and running back to Hermione's room, sloshing the water as he went.

"Well, it's time to find out if I'm right," Dumbledore said, standing and moving down the hall, careful to avoid the spilled water.

--Hermione's Point Of View--

The tingling had faded. It was the first thought to enter her mind. The second thought was that she was in bed, and there was someone else in her room. She lay in her bed, trying to remember everything that had happened. She remembered Borgin and Burkes and the Horcrux-- hopefully no one had found it yet. There was Tonks and Remus in Knockturn Alley, then Sirius and Harmony in the Leaky Cauldron. Neville in Madame Malkin's, then the Magical Menagerie, then... she had fainted in Ollivander's.

Her eye fluttered open and she looked around. The first thing she saw was a very pale Harry, sitting mortified in a chair beside her bed, staring at their clasped hands. She lightly squeezed his hand and smiled when he looked up. "Hey," she said quietly.

"You're awake!" He exclaimed, before pulling her into a hug. For a moment, Hermione thought she would pass out again, Harry was squeezing her so tightly. "I made you a flower. Do you like it?"

Made? She'd have to ask him about that later when her mind wasn't quite as fuzzy. Hermione smiled and took the wilting daisy in her hand. "It's wonderful, I love it." Harry beamed at her. "Do you have a glass of water I can put it in?"

"Hold on," he breathed excitedly. "I told the others that I'd get them when you woke up. I'll get the water when I tell them." With that, he rushed out the door and down the hall.

It was only a few moments before he came bounding back into the room. "They're coming, Hermione. They'll figure out what happened,

don't worry." He said, setting a cup of water on her nightstand. She put her flower in it with a smile.

Hermione winced when the tingling grew stronger. She looked up, surprised to see Professor Dumbledore standing with the others, all of them looking grim. She felt a sinking feeling in her stomach. This conversation was not going to be pleasant. They didn't even notice her flower. It was never a good sign when they missed something like that. It meant they had been having a less than pleasant conversation. Hermione wondered what they had been talking about. Her? Harry? Both of them?

"Hello, Hermione, you don't mind if I call you that, do you?" The headmaster asked genially as he stepped forward.

"No sir, I don't mind. Can I help you with something?" *Please don't bring up my magic, please don't bring up my magic*, she begged.

"I understand strange things have been happening concerning your magic as of late," he began as Hermione mentally cursed her luck. "It seems as though you also had a fainting spell earlier. Have you any idea why?"

Hermione licked her lips. If the look on his face was any indication, he already had a fairly good idea why she had fainted. She briefly debated what she should do-- tell the truth or lie. "I believe I fainted because I can feel magic, and I was overwhelmed." She said simply, opting for the truth.

"I see," he nodded. "And how long have you been able to feel magic?"

She bit her lip. If she was right, there would be much gnashing of teeth after this. "Since the day after Sirius' trial and the day I came to live with Papa Remus," she replied. Remus made a strangled noise. She was right.

"Hermione, why didn't you--"

"Now now, Remus, you must remember these have not been the most peaceful of days for young Hermione. I do have a small for task

for you, Hermione, if you wouldn't mind." She shook her head. Dumbledore pulled his wand out of one of the folds of his robe and held it out to her. "Take my wand for a moment."

Hermione drew back as though burned as the others, Harry excluded, drew in sharp breaths. He wanted her to take his wand? What was wrong with him? It was considered terrible etiquette to touch another witch or wizard's wand unless you were married to them, or at the very least betrothed. She was certainly not married to the headmaster. She still cringed when she remembered the time she had grabbed Harry's wand without thought in her first year.

With a quaking hand, the young witch reached out and tentatively wrapped her fingers around the wand. She frowned. She could feel the tingle from having a magical object near her, but she could not feel a surge of magic she typically felt when she touched her wand. Perhaps it was because it wasn't her wand.

"Now, if you would, say 'Lumos' while you hold my wand," Dumbledore said calmly, as though six year old girls casting spells with another wizard's wand was an everyday occurrence.

Creating light was simple enough. "Lumos," she said, expecting the tip to light up. It didn't. "Lumos," she said again, more firmly this time. Still nothing. A small wind made the curtains flutter as she felt her panic rise. "Lumos!" She said forcefully. Why wouldn't it work?

"If I may?" Dumbledore said, holding his hand out for his wand. Taking the slender rod from her, he held the wand up. "Lumos." The tip of the wand lit up as it was meant to. "Now, if you would, please take my wand again?"

Hermione reached out for the wand with more confidence this time. The moment she touched the wand, however, the light intensified tenfold and lit up the entire room. Everyone flinched back, and Hermione dropped the wand to cover her eyes.

The headmaster blinked several times as he retrieved his wand. "Well, I am sad to say that I'm certain I am correct." He said quietly.

Sirius ground his teeth, clearly losing his patience. "What's going on? What's wrong with Hermione?"

Dumbledore didn't seem to notice Sirius' impatience. "There is nothing wrong with her, really, she is merely different."

Hermione stiffened. "Please talk to me, not about me." The adults looked at her in surprise for a moment then flushed. Harry ducked his head to hide his smile. "If you would, please, tell me what is different about me?" She strained to keep herself under control.

The old man looked at her carefully for a moment as he casually pointed his wand at her, before Hermione felt a tickling in her mind. *Legillemency!* She realized. She quickly threw up her mental shields-- they were not very powerful, considering she had never had the chance to test them as she had only managed to read about occlumency. It was shocking to her to see the headmaster jerk back from the strength of her shields. When he gave her a penetrating look, she raised her head defiantly.

He raised his eyebrows but lowered his wand and spoke. "This is only a guess, you understand," he began, "but I believe you will all better understand the situation if I give you a brief history lesson." With a little flick of his wand, he summoned a squashy chintz chair and down next to Harry. "Oh, how rude of me," he said, and with another flick of his wand, three more chairs appeared, all surrounding Hermione's bed. Soon everyone was seated.

"There is very little written history on this matter, and a great deal of it is only the musings of an old man. It is believed, however, that the first wizards did not have wands-- they did not need them. In short, they were a great deal like you, Hermione.

"The witches and wizards of old had a similar problem. Their magic reacted to nearly anything. It is believed that the most powerful and wise of the ancient wizards thought it would be best to bind magical beings for their protection as well as the protection of others. I understand you have difficulties with your magic, yes? Well, it is one thing for a few responsible wizarding beings to have such untamed magic, but when everyone has it, well, I'm sure you can imagine the damage that could be, and was, caused.

“Now, these wise and powerful wizards of old, decided for the safety of all that it would be best to bind *all* witches and wizards. I do not know how it was done, but they managed to accomplish their task. They created a sort of shield in each witch and wizard that was formed instinctively. This shield contained the magic that person had and prevented it from lashing out when the witch or wizard was upset. As a result, witches and wizards needed a conductor, usually a wand, sometimes a staff, to help them cast their magic.

“I would say, however, that all magical beings can do, and in fact have done, wandless magic at least once. It is a simple fact. Our magic is our defense, and the wizards of old understood this. They found a way to allow our magic to find holes in our shields, if you will, to help us if we should need it.

“Over the course of time, each magical person has been born with this shield, and you are no exception. You had shields just as I have. The difference, Hermione, is that you broke yours. I believe the night your parents died,” he gentled his voice, “is the night you broke the barriers containing your magic. I cannot be sure, but I believe that, as a six year old little girl, you felt there was little you could do. Unable to lash out, your magic did so for you, shattering your shield in the process.

“Because of this, your magic is free, and will do what it pleases until you learn to control it. This explains why you fainted earlier-- magics that do not require a wand will come quite naturally to you. There are many things you can learn later when you are older, but what caused you to faint earlier was the ability to sense magic. All magical beings can do it, I have done it, Sirius, Remus, Nymphadora, they could all do it. Young Harry could do it, if he were taught how.

“It is not difficult to feel magic. Generally, it does require a great deal of concentration to do it. Since your magic is not contained, however, sensing magic comes naturally to you. I’m sure the only reason this ability didn’t manifest itself sooner was because you were under a great deal of stress. From my own experiences sensing magic, I will say that you will not be able to tell the difference between dark magic and light magic, because there is no difference. Simply put, magic is magic.

"Your untamed magic is also the reason why my wand lit up so brightly. The shields, I believe, regulate how much magic a person uses-- you have no such limitations, and so were able to push more magic into my wand than even I was."

"But why couldn't I cast the spell myself?" Hermione asked, dreading the answer. She had listened carefully and understood everything he had said. Everything made sense... everything but this. Her stomach twisted in knots as she waited for his answer.

"You could not cast a spell because you cannot use a wand at all." The room was silent with his pronouncement. Harry looked confused. Tonks and the others looked thunderstruck.

I'm not going to cry, she said to herself, biting her lip. *I'm not going to cry*. "Why?" She asked, her voice strained.

"I'm afraid I cannot say. I have merely my own speculations on this matter. History tells us that the ancient wizards did not need a wand, and so they never used one. It wasn't until their magic was contained that they needed a conductor for magic. I believe that, since you do not need a wand, your magic is rejecting the use of one. The same applies to incantations-- you simply do not need them any longer. It seems that you can add your own magic to someone else's, as you demonstrated earlier when you touched my wand, but you will never be able to cast a spell with one."

Hermione couldn't breathe. Never use a wand? *I'm not going to cry*. How would she manage without her beloved vine wood and dragon heart string wand? *I'm not going to cry*. It had been her one constant companion when she was at Hogwarts, long before the troll incident her first year, and through her constant battles with Ron. How could she go on without the comfort of knowing it was in her pocket or stored in her sleeve for easy access? *I'm not going to cry*. The windows shattered.

"I thought you said you put an unbreakable charm on those things, Moony," Sirius said quietly to his friend.

"I did," Remus sighed, muttering an incantation to repair the windows.

Everyone was silent then, each lost in their own thoughts. Even Harry seemed to understand that what Hermione was dealing with was a very serious matter, and looked nearly as sad as Hermione was. Remus leaned forward and set his hand on her shoulder, trying to offer her what comfort he could.

"My-My," Harmony said quietly, a pout on her tiny face as she reached out. "My-My, wuh-ooo."

Hermione sniffled and looked up with a small, shaky smile on her face. "Thanks Harmony," she said, her voice raspy. Was that really her voice? *I'm not going to cry.*

"Well, I think we need to move on, and begin working on how to solve your problem." Dumbledore said, leaning back in his chair. "You'll be attending Hogwarts in a few years, but between now and then, you are certainly going to want to go into the wizarding world. The question is, what can we do?" He began to stroke his beard thoughtfully.

Tonks coughed lightly. "Well, I don't know if this would help any, but, in the auror academy, we just finished going over power dampeners. They're not very ethical, but they're not illegal. Can we make her one of those?" She asked nervously.

"What a wonderful idea, Nymphadora!" He said, ignoring Tonks' wince. He turned back to Hermione. "Power dampeners are typically used for children with a great deal of power. They are not commonly used because they are limit how much magic the wearer can do. I'm sure that we can modify the dampener we make for you so that it wouldn't hinder your wandless casting." Dumbledore said in a comforting tone. "I don't suppose you have a non-magical piece of jewelry that you wear constantly, do you?"

Hermione's hand immediately went to the necklace she had gotten from Great Aunt Josephine's treasure box, but hesitated. Part of her was desperate to get rid of the constant tingling and attain some bit of normalcy. Another part wanted to keep this small part of her old life as un-magical as her parents. *What must be done, must be done.*

Swallowing thickly, she pulled the long black cord over her head and handed the professor the Celtic cross. *I'm not going to cry.* He examined it for a moment then nodded. "This should work well," he said as he stood.

"I shall set to work on this immediately and owl it to you hopefully by morning-- I know you have a ceremony to attend tomorrow evening. My old friend Filius Flitwick has returned to Hogwarts early this year to help recast the wards. He'd be delighted to help me with this, I'm sure. Well, I really must be going if I am to do this in a timely manner."

"I'll show you to the door," Sirius said quietly, standing and walking out the door.

"I'd better go as well," Tonks said after a moment, handing Harmony to Remus. "I have things to do, tests to study for and all."

"I'll walk with you," Remus volunteered. He turned back to the young witch. "I'm always willing to talk, you know that, right Hermione?" She smiled and nodded. He watched her for a moment, then turned and walked out the door, talking quietly with Tonks. She thought she heard something about a school, but she couldn't be sure.

"Are you alright Hermione? Do you need anything? Do you want some soup?" Harry asked.

Hermione gave him a genuine smile. "I'm fine, Harry, just tired I guess."

"Oh," he nodded. "Well, you should get some sleep then." Harry hesitated, then pulled her into another hug. "It's okay, Hermione. I'm different too. Sometimes my magic does stuff and I can't control it. One time, when Aunt Petunia gave me a really bad haircut, I grew my hair back overnight. I wish I could control my magic better."

Hermione smiled weakly. "You and me, both. It looks like we both need to work on controlling our magic."

"Yes," Harry nodded. "I can't make magic happen, you can't make it not happen. Do you, well, do you think maybe you could help me learn how to use my magic? Please?"

Hermione looked at Harry and considered her options. It was a long shot, but maybe, just maybe, if she taught Harry to control his magic, it would help her gain control as well. "Okay Harry, I'll try." Harry grinned in relief. "But you can't tell anyone, not Sirius or Papa Remus. It's a secret-- it's our secret."

Harry nodded earnestly. "I won't tell anyone, I promise. You look sleepy Hermione. I'm going to go and let you get some sleep. I'll see you in the morning," he promised and left her to her solitude.

She felt a twinge of loneliness as she watched him walk away. He was such a wonderful friend. It was hard to know he could turn into a Dark Lord if he were pushed too far. Shoving her thoughts aside, she pushed her blankets off and slipped out of bed. Rummaging through the packages sitting in the corner of her room, she began to hunt for the Ravenclaw Horcrux.

Finally, Hermione found the pocket containing the bracelet that once belonged to Rowena Ravenclaw. She scowled. It wasn't fair that the sapphires in the bracelet should sparkle in the fading light when she had just been given such dismal news. How could she be a witch without a wand? Everything was going to change now.

Hermione smiled grimly as she considered her situation. All that glitters is not gold, indeed. She put the Ravenclaw Horcrux in the drawer next to the locket and collapsed onto her bed, distantly wondering what dreams would come tonight as she stared unseeingly at the setting sun. What she wouldn't give to be normal again, to be six year old girl laying in her bed in her home. To be the old Hermione Granger again.

I'm not going to cry.

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A/N: Please don't flame me, I warned you a long time ago that something like this was going to happen. I said "If I give my

characters something, you can be sure they will pay for it in some way later.” Well, I gave Hermione wandless magic, and now she has learned the price-- her wand. Please let me know if any of my explanations were unclear-- if they were, I'd like to fix any problems you see with them.

On another note, I have nothing against the name Neville. That was just Harry thinking. No, my Dumbledore is not evil. I have always questioned the validity of the blood wards, but I don't think Dumbledore thought he could be wrong about them. So I showed my doubt and my faith in Dumbledore all in one chapter.

Well, as always, thank you to everyone who read and reviewed the last time. I hope you enjoyed reading this chapter, and please review.

Cheers,

Madm05

Chapter Six: Night

This, Hermione was sure, had to be a dream. It couldn't be anything else. After all, she was standing right in front of the Dark Harry. His raven hair was slightly mussed, and he was sweating a little, but it was the Dark Harry, just the same.

The room she was standing in was unfamiliar. She couldn't recall having ever seen a room quite like this in either Hogwarts or Grimmauld Place or any other area she had seen while hunting for the Horcruxes. Hermione shuddered. It appeared to be a dungeon, complete with torches, shackles and blood spattered walls. The odor of fresh blood mixed with singed skin wafted to her nose, making her gag.

"There, now, that wasn't so bad, was it?" The Dark Harry said with a kind smile to someone behind her. Swallowing thickly, Hermione slowly turned around, afraid of what she would see. Her fear was justified.

In the center of the room, suspended from a chain hanging from the ceiling, was Draco Malfoy. His shirt had been stripped away, leaving him bared to the waist. His chest, however, was covered in strange cuts and small rivers of bloods. Warily stepping forward, Hermione realized they were words carved into his skin. She choked. The words read "I will not look upon the Lady Hermione" over and over. A sort of insignia was burned repeatedly into his arms-- the letters HP intertwined with the letters HG.

"Now tell me Draco-- you don't mind if I call you Draco, do you? Of course you don't. So tell me, what are *not* going to do ever again?" Harry asked, still smiling kindly, as though he were indulging a child, while walking around him. Watching him walk was mesmerizing, it was like watching water roll down a hill, he moved so fluidly.

Draco drew in a shuddering breath. "I- I will n-not look upon the Lady Her-Hermione," he rasped, his throat raw.

Harry's smile widened. "Well, what do you know, you can learn something. I almost thought I'd have to carve my little reminders into your back." He smiled winningly at his captive. "Now don't you worry.

I don't blame you for being obsessed with my Hermione. It would be a tad hypocritical of me, after all. She captivates people so easily, you know." The smile vanished, his face becoming an impassive mask. "Just make sure you keep your obsession, and your eyes, to yourself and away from her." He looked thoughtful for a moment before he turned away. "Dobby!"

A second later, the house elf appeared. He was dressed smartly in some sort of uniform. Over his heart was a crest, bearing the letters HP intertwined with HG. It was the same mark that was burned into Malfoy's arms. "Yes, Harry Potter sir? What can Dobby do for sir?" He asked, bowing so low that his nose touched the floor.

Harry smiled slightly, grabbing a towel and wiping the blood off of his hands. "Don't bow and scrape like that Dobby-- I don't like it when my friends act like that. I just wanted to ask you where Hermione was."

Dobby frowned. "The Lady Hermione is with Harry Potter's Wheezy. Dobby thinks..." The elf drifted off, looking unsure of himself.

"What is it, Dobby?" Harry asked, his eyes narrowing.

"Dobby thinks that Harry Potter's Wheezy is trying to take Harry Potter's Lady from him." Dobby said at last. "Dobby was watching Lady Hermione like Harry Potter told him to, and she was talking to Harry Potter's Wheezy in the garden. The Wheezy was holding a little box in his hands, but the Lady couldn't see it." Dobby concluded. "Dobby didn't know whether to tell Harry Potter or not, because it would hurt him to know his Wheezy is trying to steal the Lady, but Dobby didn't want Harry Potter to lose his Lady."

Harry froze. "It's just one problem after another, isn't it?" He said darkly. "First my naughty little dragon, and now Ron. It's a shame, really. Ron is my best mate. He probably doesn't even realize Hermione is mine. He's always been a bit thick."

He turned to the elf. "You did the right thing, Dobby, telling me. It seems to me that Ron needs a lesson in how things work now. Perhaps you would give it to him? I'll understand if something should go wrong during the lesson, it being so difficult to learn. After all, accidents happen, don't they Dobby?"

Dobby smiled. "Oh yes, Harry Potter sir. Accidents do happen, quite often. If Harry Potter agrees, Dobby has work he would like to be doing."

"Of course, Dobby, I understand perfectly." He watched the elf disappear with a pop and turned back to his prisoner. "You do understand, Draco, that if Hermione ever learns of this little chat, there will be consequences?" He asked in a mockingly sympathetic voice as he approached the bound man.

"If Hermione finds out, I'll torture that bimbo you call a wife and your infant son in front of you." He smiled serenely, his white teeth sparkling in the torchlight. "Then I'll kill you in front of them and turn them into slaves. Now, don't get me wrong, I wouldn't touch your wife with a ten foot pole, but I'd find something for her to do. Do you think your wife Pansy would enjoy serving as entertainment for my other servants? I bet she would.

"As for the boy," he smiled mischievously. "Well, I'll keep him around for a while. After all, one day Hermione and I *will* be married, and who else will our children practice their spells on?" Harry laughed cheerfully at the look of horror on Malfoy's face as he turned away.

The dream began to shift and Hermione found herself standing in a beautiful garden alongside the Dark Harry. The thin sheen of sweat was gone and his hair was slicked back again. His eyes were as cold as they were black.

He casually reached over and plucked a blue flower from one of the flower beds and looked at a young woman sitting on a stone bench. "Hermione," he called out. The young woman looked up and sure enough, it was an older version of herself. The Hermione Granger that would exist if Harry had succeeded in raising her from the dead.

"Harry!" She beamed. "I thought you were going to be busy with Ministry meetings all day. Not that I'm complaining, but why are you here so soon?"

Harry smiled and shrugged nonchalantly. "I finished earlier than I expected, that's all." He handed her the flower. "For you."

Hermione blushed as she accepted the gift. "Oh Harry, you're so bad!" She laughed. "It's your birthday, not mine. I should be giving gifts to you!" Her face softened. "Thank you though. You've been so wonderful to me ever since I woke up from that dreadful enchanted sleep, letting me stay here in your manor and all. I'm still so weak and need so much help, you must think me a horrible guest."

The young Hermione nodded to herself. So she was in Potter Manor. That could be useful information in the future. She has seen this place in her dreams often, but now she finally had a name for it.

"Never Hermione, I know you're still weak from that spell. It's understandable-- you were sleeping for well over a year. That's why I brought you here before I woke you up, so that you wouldn't have to deal with a lot of people. Besides, I know how you like the quiet so you can read," he grinned roguishly. "I'm sorry it took me so long to find a way to bring you back though." Harry said, his voice soft and quiet, his black eyes glistening. He seemed to be haunted by ghosts of his past.

I was dead! Her mind screamed. *That was no enchanted sleep!* It was useless to say anything-- she couldn't be seen or heard. She knew from experience-- this was not the first dream featuring the Dark Harry and her other self that she had had, and she was certain it wouldn't be the last either.

"Don't worry about it, Harry," Hermione smiled, resting her hand on his arm in a comforting gesture. "I know you would have woken me up sooner if you could. Research was always my area of expertise," she teased. "I am glad you're here though. I was talking with Ron earlier. He said he wanted to ask me something, but before he could, Dobby appeared and said there had been some sort of accident on the Quidditch pitch. Do you know what he was going to ask?"

"No," Harry said, shaking his head. *Liar! I may not be able to see your memories, but I can do enough wandless Legilimency that I can tell you're lying!* "I have something I would like to ask you, if you don't mind."

The older Hermione looked up. "What do you want to ask me, Harry? I don't suppose you want me to find a way to turn your eyes back to

normal, do you?" She frowned slightly. "I know you said you modified the ritual so that it would not require blood, but I still don't like that you cast a dark spell to fix your eyes."

Harry frowned slightly. "No, my eyes are fine as they are. I know you don't like it, but this is how they are, and how they are going to stay."

Hermione sighed. "I had a feeling you would say that. Fine, I'll leave you alone about the issue. So, what did you want to ask me?"

He pulled her into a tight embrace, his eyes boring into Ron's as the redhead walked into the garden, stopping in his tracks when he saw them. With her back to him, Hermione never saw the redhead approach. "I wanted to ask you to stay with me forever."

"W-what?" Hermione gasped, trying to pull away to look at him, but held her fast.

"Would you marry me, Hermione? I couldn't bear if you left me again." He said, his black eyes dancing with amusement as he looked at Ron's pale face, but his voice was sincere. "I couldn't think straight when I saw you get hit by that spell after we killed Nagini. It was like watching you fall in the Department of Mysteries all over again. Will you, Hermione? Will you marry me?"

She looked slightly dazed as she nodded before breaking out into a goofy grin and a giggle. "Yes!" She gasped before laughing happily. "Oh Harry I-- I never imagined this would happen." She laughed again and held him tightly. "I fancied you since we were in fourth year, but I never thought that you...oh this--"

Harry shot Ron a triumphant smirk then laughed as he released her. "I didn't know you fancied me since fourth year," he said, speaking louder than he needed to as he tilted his head in amusement at her blush. "It's nice to know, though, that you care. I believe you are missing something though." He said casually.

"What?" Hermione asked, frowning.

"A ring," Harry smiled. With out another word, he tenderly took the flower from her and began to blow gently on it. Hermione watched in

amazement as the stem began to curl into a golden band. The flower head became incased in some sort of stone and began to shrink until it formed a ring with a flower encased in the diamond.

"It's beautiful, Harry," she breathed.

"Just like you," he smiled winningly as he slipped the ring on her finger. He looked up and feigned surprise. "Ron! Wonderful news, mate," he said, wrapping his arm possessively around her waist. "Hermione and I are engaged. Isn't that wonderful?"

"Y-yeah. Great. Wonderful. Congratulations. L-listen, I have to, um, to go. I have some stuff I have to take care of." With that, Ron turned and walked stiffly away from them.

"Ron?" Hermione called. When he didn't reply, she turned back to Harry. "Did he seem off to you? He was fine earlier..."

"He probably found out that the Cannons aren't going to the Quidditch World Cup. Come on, let's go inside. When should we tell everyone else the news, do you think?"

Again the dreamscape shifted. Now Hermione stood in a bedroom done in varying shades of cream and blue. Sitting on the bed was her older self, weeping as the Dark Harry held her.

"Hush now, Hermione, these things happen," Harry murmured soothingly into her ear. He began to rub her back in comforting circles.

"I don't understand, Harry." Hermione sobbed into his shoulder. "Ron was never very clumsy. How could he fall off of a tower? You don't think he was pushed, do you?"

"Hermione," Harry began hesitantly, "there's something you should know, something that I didn't find out until it was too late."

Hermione looked up at him with red-rimmed eyes. "What?" She asked, her voice hoarse.

"Ron was going to ask you to marry him earlier." He said sadly as she gasped. "I didn't know it, but he was. He was so angry that you

wanted to marry me.” He cupped her cheek as he spoke softly. “A few hours ago, he challenged me to a duel for your hand. He wanted to kill me so that he could have you.”

He’s lying! The young Hermione wanted to scream. *That’s not what happened! I don’t know the details, but everything he just said was a lie. Don’t believe him!*

“But I knew that he wasn’t thinking straight, and that you wouldn’t want to be the reason for a fight between us, although I could also tell he’d been drinking. I told him to leave us alone, that it was his fault he didn’t say anything sooner. He accused me of stealing you from him, he said that he deserved you because he didn’t have anything else.” He lowered his head in shame, his voice choked with feigned remorse. “I was so angry with him, Hermione. I was so mad that Ron would treat you like a trophy that I told him to get out of my sight.”

That’s not true!

“After he left, I sent Dobby to watch him, make sure he didn’t hurt himself. Dobby reported to me that Ron was up on the tower, staggering around and drinking a bottle of Old Ogden’s. Right after Dobby went back to watching Ron, he came back and said that Ron must have fallen off of the tower.”

Hermione sobbed harder. “Y-you don’t think he killed himself, do you?”

“No Hermione, Ron wouldn’t kill himself. Come, lay down. This has been an eventful day, though sadly not everything has been good. I’ll stay with you for the night, in case you need me.” Harry pulled the blanket up and covered her before he lay on top of the cream colored quilt. He kissed her on the temple as he pulled her against his body and lay back with Hermione curled against his side, her head resting on his chest as she cried.

“Rest now. It will hurt less in the morning,” he said quietly. The older Hermione obviously didn’t think to ask why he sounded like he spoke from experience. “I’ll make everything better Hermione, you’ll see.” Her sobs quieted as she began to doze lightly. Harry’s black eyes glittered dangerously as the corners of his lips turned up in a dark

smile. He rested his cheek against her head and rested his arm protectively-- possessively -- around her waist, holding her close. "Accidents happen."

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Hermione sat up in her bed, her heart pounding as she gasped for air. She was tangled in her bed sheets, covered in cold sweat as she panted for breath. A chill ran down her spine when a small breeze blew through her room. She was glad Sirius and Remus had finished putting stronger charms on everything in her room after the headmaster left; tonight's dream was particularly disturbing-- she didn't want to know what damage she would have done as she slept.

Pushing those thoughts away, Hermione looked out her window. She hated the night. But then, there were many things that she hated now. She hated Voldemort and his thrice- be- damned Horcruxes. She hated the Divine Beings that sent her on this mission. She hated that she would have to wear her Great Aunt Josephine's soon to be magical necklace whenever she went out to dampen her ability to feel magic. She hated that her occlumency shields were unbreakable by even a master Legilimens but she could never light the tip of a wand. She hated that she could look into a persons eyes and tell if they were telling the truth or lying, but never be able to cast even a simply bat bogey hex. She hated what a paradox her life had become. She collapsed back against her pillow, wondering what twist of fate life would bring her next as she gazed out her window. And of course, she hated the night.

Turning her attention to her ceiling, she recalled the dream, and felt herself blush when she remembered how she had fancied Harry since her fourth year. It hadn't crossed her mind since she had gone back in time. It occurred to her that she would have to find something for Harry for his birthday, as it was only a little over a week away. She cringed in remembrance of her dream. The Dark Harry had gotten exactly what he wanted for his birthday-- her.

She didn't want to think about that now, though. It was best to remember that she had changed the future, and to take comfort in the fact that Ron would never have an "accident" and meet his demise. In

fact, if she had her way, Voldemort would never rise, and Harry would never lose someone he cared for again.

Hermione heard the creak of the floorboard outside her door and sat up when her door cracked open. "Harry?" She whispered as the figure froze. "Is that you?"

"I didn't know you were awake," Harry replied quietly, slipping into her room. "I wanted to come in and check on you while you sleep because I know sometimes you have nightmares." He came into her room to check on her? If it weren't for her nightmare, she would have found the situation sweet. "Are you alright? I thought I heard you wiggling around or something."

Hermione smiled tightly. "I'm fine, Harry, really. I just... it was just a bad dream, that's all."

"Was it about your parents?" He asked sadly. "Sirius told me they died, but that it wasn't something he should tell, so I should wait until you're ready to tell me. I don't dream about my parents, not really, but sometimes when I was in my cupboard, I could remember this green flash of light, but that's all." He started tugging on her blankets, trying to straighten them out.

Hermione smiled as she slipped out of bed and helped him straighten her blankets. "Thank you Harry, I really appreciate this, honestly." He lowered his head, his flushed face glowing in the moonlight.

Harry hesitated a moment as she slipped back into bed. "Do you want me to stay with you for a while? Until you fall asleep, I mean. I'll leave if you want me to." He said quickly.

She forced a smile. "You can stay if you want, but I'm probably going to be up for a while."

Harry climbed into the bed and sat beside her. "It helps if you think of something nice. Sometimes I dream about when I did something wrong and Uncle Vernon locked me in my cupboard without meals as punishment. I always had to make breakfast though, and I had to get up early, so I would think of something good to help me sleep. Usually, I would think about a long lost relative coming to rescue me,"

he smiled, "but what really happened was even better." Hermione smiled in return. "So do you want to talk about what's bothering you?"

Hermione felt her smile widen slightly. He really was so sweet. She looked into his eyes, needing to see those beautiful, shining emeralds to block out her memory of glistening obsidian orbs staring at her. Since she couldn't tell him about her dream, she decided to tell him what she had said she would tell him earlier. With a heavy sigh, Hermione told her friend how she came to be in the wizarding world. He put a comforting hand on her shoulder when she choked out the part of finding her parents dead bodies. She was thankful that he merely sat beside her and offered comfort while she talked. Through it all, though, she held back the tears threatening to fall. She would not be weak.

He couldn't understand how what she had seen had affected her, having never witnessed such a thing, and on some level both were thankful for that small favor, but it helped to know that he did understand what it was like to be an orphan. The world seemed less lonely knowing that they shared the same dark piece of their pasts.

There was a sad look in Harry's eyes as he changed the topic. "Hey, why don't we talk about the award ceremony at that Ministry place. What do you think is going to happen tomorrow?"

Hermione shrugged. "It pains me to admit I don't know. It is likely that they'll try to use us to raise their standing in the eyes of the voters. Politics and all." Harry stared blankly at her, clearly not understanding a word she had said. She sighed.

"Bad things happened to us, Harry, and the people at the Ministry did bad things to Sirius. They were very unfair to him, remember? They put him in prison and didn't even let him try to prove he wasn't the one who killed all of those people. Now there are a lot of people who are angry with those in the Ministry for what they did to Sirius. So now the Ministry is going to give Sirius something to make the people happy with them again. They will probably give you and me something too, just to make themselves look even better and since you, and apparently me as well, are famous, they'll probably want to

give us something so that we'll agree with them in the future. It will make them look better if we like them."

Harry frowned. "So they are going to give us stuff to make people like them? And to make us like them too?"

Hermione nodded. "That's about it, yes. I guess we're important now, and they want us to like them so that we'll help them when they want us to. The question is, what do they want to give us?"

Harry shrugged. "People never give me stuff, so I'm not very sure. Maybe they'll give us toys. Aunt Marge-- she's not really my aunt, but I have to call her that-- and Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon always give Dudley toys, and he likes them, so maybe that's what the Ministry people will do. I don't know."

Hermione gave him a sad smile and shook her head. It both amazed and appalled her how the Dursleys could be so cruel to such a sweet boy. "I don't know either."

They were silent for a while before Harry changed the topic again. "Will you still teach me to do magic? I really want to learn, but I'll understand if you have other things to do." He said quietly, his eyes shining with hope.

Smiling, she replied, "I will teach you, Harry, just not tonight, and probably not tomorrow either, since we have to attend the ceremony the Ministry is having. I think we can start working on wandless magic the day after that, okay?"

Harry nodded happily. "That sounds like a good idea to me. Do you think you could get some sleep now?" He asked, a knowing look in his eyes.

Hermione looked at him for a moment and nodded. "Yes, I think I could manage it." She looked out the window. "It must be past midnight by now." She looked back at her friend. "We had better get to sleep Harry."

"Okay, Hermione. Come on, lay down. I'll stay with you in case you need me." Harry said. Hermione suddenly found she was too sleepy

to argue that it would not be very appropriate. Instead she nodded and lay back against him and fell into a deep slumber, Harry quickly following her into the arms of Morpheus.

A few moments later, the door opened again. "Are you absolutely sure you heard something in here Padfoot? I don't--" Remus was struck silent at the sight before him.

Sirius peeked in and gulped. "That uh, that looks a tad intimate, don't you think Moony?" He suddenly looked terrified. "You don't think we should talk with them, do you?"

"We talk with them all the time Sirius." The werewolf looked confused. "What are you talking about?"

Sirius gave an exasperated sigh and nodded nervously towards the sleeping children. "I don't mean talk with them, I mean have The Talk with them!" He grumbled.

Remus' eyes widened. "Well I don't think we need to do something as drastic as that. I think they might be a bit young for that," he squeaked.

"Moony, Harry is sleeping in Hermione's room and, despite our best efforts, is still convinced he's married to her. I think we need to have a talk with them about this sort of thing." Sirius replied. "We can't let things get carried away."

Remus chuckled nervously as he shut the door. "They're awfully young, Sirius, I don't think they can 'get carried away'. It's completely innocent. A talk, maybe, but we certainly don't need to have The Talk with them. I'm sure they're much too young for that." He said, walking down the hall.

Sirius gave him a look. "Are you sure you were sorted into Gryffindor? You don't sound very brave to me. Come on, Moony, it's just a couple of kids. What are you so afraid to have a talk with them?"

The werewolf snorted. "You're only so confident about it because you have to have The Talk with Harry, who is, in fact, male. I have to have

The Talk with Hermione, who is, in fact, not.” Remus grumbled in reply.

Sirius chuckled and nodded his head in agreement. “This is true, old friend, this is true. I’ll tell you what. Let’s sleep on it tonight-- it’s too late for this sort of talk. We’ll talk it over in the morning, speak with the kids a bit, see what they know and where they stand with each other, maybe take another stab at convincing Harry there’s more to marriage than living together, and if we need to, we’ll have The Talk. If not, we’ll let it go. Frankly, I’d rather put something as... monumental... as The Talk off as long as I can.”

Remus looked thoughtful for a moment then nodded. “That seems like a good way to go about it. Perhaps we can even talk with Hermione about being a Seer. She may not understand everything that’s happening to her, so telling her that there are people with gifts like hers may help her. We could even tell her there’s a class she can take at Hogwarts that will help her learn to control it better. It’s a shame Dora won’t be able to come over anytime soon. She’d certainly be able to lend a hand.” He sighed.

Sirius smirked. “And just how is my cousin? I wouldn’t know, considering she spends all of time with you when she visits, which was only the once. She spent almost the entire time she was ‘visiting me’ with you. Why is that, do you think?” His eyes had a mischievous glint.

Remus blushed furiously. “Harmony likes her.”

“Just Harmony?” Sirius asked, a mischievous glint in his eyes.

“Hermione likes her, too. So does Harry,” Remus defended, his face red as a cherry. He cleared his throat. “Well, it’s late, and we need to get up early if we’re going to make a good appearance at the ceremony.”

Sirius snorted. “We’re going to have a horrible time getting him out of bed tomorrow. If he’s anything like James, there’s no way he’ll budge from that bed now that there’s a girl in there with him.”

Remus tripped over his fee. "Sirius! They're kids! Get your mind straightened out, man," he grumbled.

"It's true, and you know it, Moony. James would lay in bed all day with Lily if she would have let him."

"I'm going to bed, Padfoot, and I'm going to forget you just said that." Remus said, walking into his bedroom.

"Come on, Moony, he is his father's son. In his mind, Harry went from being Hermione's friend to being her fiancée to being her husband in under two minutes, and now they're sleeping together. He moves fast." Sirius said casually, but the ever present twinkle of mischief gave him away.

"This is not a laughing matter! They're children." Remus said, his face flushing furiously in the dark.

"I'm not laughing, Moony." Sirius grinned. Even nearly five years in Azkaban couldn't rob him of his sense of humor-- he was determined to enjoy his new life to the fullest.

"I'm going to bed, and I'm not going to listen to you, so you might as well stop talking." Remus said firmly, turning towards his room.

"Fine," Sirius said. "But only because you know I'm right." He smiled as he watched his friend stalk determinedly away. How he loved getting Moony all riled up. It was so much fun. Chuckling, Sirius walked into his own room, ready for a good night's sleep, even if it was nearly one in the morning.

Down the hall, in Hermione's room, the two children were fast asleep. Had Hermione been awake or simply more aware before she had fallen asleep, she would have trembled at the sight before her. She and Harry had unwittingly modeled what her older self and the Dark Harry had done in her dream. Hermione lay curled against Harry's side under the blankets while Harry himself had his arm thrown protectively over her, his cheek resting against her head as he lay sleeping atop the blankets.

But in the dark of night, she would never know.

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A/N: This was more of a transitional chapter. As a reminder, no, Harry in the new timeline is not evil, but Harry is Harry-- a good portion of his life is the same in both timelines. Part of what I wanted to do was emphasize that the Harry in both realities is the same Harry in many ways. Well, I also wanted to visit with the Dark Harry. I don't know about you, but the way he's so cheerful when he tortures people creeps me out. Speaking of creepy, if any of you like Dark HHr or stuff like that, you may want to check out some of **DarkGoddess2002**'s works. She redefines creepy.

There is something I'd like to address here. It was pointed out that Hermione is now free of her wand, and that it should be a good thing. In some ways it is. In a lot of ways, it's not. For instance, she will have more difficulty casting certain spells, like the Patronus charm and various wards. As compensation, however, I did decide that wandless magics are natural to her, so apparation, occlumency, sensing magic, and the wandless part of legillemency are something she can do whenever she wants. If any of you want the in-depth version of why Hermione is upset about not having her wand, let me know and I'd be happy to give it to you.

Thank you to everyone who read and reviewed the last time. As for this time, well, if you read, please review-- it is difficult to improve if no one tells me what I'm doing right or wrong.

Cheers,

Madm05

Chapter Six: Ceremonies

Looking in the mirror, Hermione realized she had never seen a set dress robes quite as hideous as the set she was now wearing. It was a horrible shade of pink that reminded her of vomit, and there were far too many frills and far too much lace. If she had to describe it in one word, she would call it nauseating. What was Remus thinking when he picked these robes out? How could she be expected to wear them?

Checking to be sure her door was shut, she set to work trying to save her dignity. After everything she had lost, she still had her pride after all. The first thing that had to go was the color-- she was not going out in public looking like throw - up.

Looking in the mirror, she began to build up her emotions-- her humiliation at having to wear the robes and her desperation to make it more bearable-- and focused her magic to change the unsightly robes to a lovely shade of crimson, her favorite color. It wasn't exactly a little girl color, but her next choice was black-- she was still mourning her parents. All least the crimson was sort of a Gryffindor color. She began looking over the robes, checking to be sure there were no patches of pink that she had missed. It was already more tolerable.

Hermione looked back at the mirror, contemplating what to do next to salvage the dress robes. The lace on the collar had to go, as well as the lace trimming the cuffs of her sleeves. It took a great deal of concentration, but eventually she managed to shrink the bits of lace enough that they weren't visible. Next to go were the frills. By the time she was finished, she was wearing a set of plain, crimson dress robes-- there were no intricate patters, and a minimum of lace and frills. She smiled in satisfaction.

It was moments like this she was thankful for her wandless magic. Not that she was very happy about it. The only other drawback she could see about wandless magic was the headache she got every time she did something that was more difficult than making glass shatter or books fly around the room. After staring out her window for half the day, she had come to accept that she would never again hold

her much loved wand. Some other lucky witch or wizard would hold it someday. The jealous part of her mind hoped that it wouldn't work half as well for whoever owned it next than it did for her.

Pulling herself away from her thoughts, Hermione reached out for the final piece of her ensemble and felt immediate relief from the constant tingling. She stared at the Celtic cross around her neck and hated it. She hated what it had become, hated what it meant. Bit by bit, she was losing herself to the wizarding world, she was losing the muggle part of herself. And she hated it.

The first time she had entered the wizarding world, she couldn't wait to get rid of all her foolish muggle things. She was a witch, and she didn't want to be a muggle any longer. She never tried to be a pureblood, and she never wanted to be one. She just didn't want to be a muggle. She never realized how precious those foolish muggle things were until her house was burned to cinders by the Death Eaters and she no longer had them.

When Remus became her guardian, he had asked her what she wanted to keep. Now, locked in an oak chest that had been in her family for three generations, was every single picture her parents had taken, from the endearing family photos to the embarrassing picture of the first time she had eaten cake as a child, along with a few family heirlooms. She had chosen to keep many of Harmony's things, though, so that her sister could have something to remember their parents by.

On her bed was the only toy she was permitted to have in her room--a stuffed blue dog she had named Disco that her parents had given her when she was three. In the drawer of her nightstand, was the journal from Uncle Jack. Around her neck was Great Aunt Josephine's necklace. And she was losing it all. She had wanted to keep so much more, but it simply wasn't practical to keep broken chairs and blood stained furniture.

Her photographs were locked away to protect them from her rampant magic. The time would come when she would have to destroy the journal, and the last piece of Uncle Jack would be lost. The necklace she wore had already been corrupted-- it was a magical necklace

now. Hermione looked at the stuffed dog reflected in her mirror and prayed it would remain untouched by magic. It was foolish, she knew, to cling to her muggle life, but it felt as if she were betraying her parents every time she--

No, best to think of something else. Magic, yes that was a relatively safe topic. Hermione sighed heavily as she considered her magic. It was painful to think about in many ways, and thrilling in others. It was, for instance, fascinating that she was a natural Occlumens now. Technically, her magic would automatically create a shield if anyone tried to invade her mind. It was a small consolation to know that her untamed magic would keep her secrets safe.

The same for Legilimency-- she would be able to look into another's eyes know if they were lying, and she could reach out with her mind to sense their emotions. She could not, however, see their memories. She winced. A wand was needed for that. It was interesting that apparation, too, should theoretically be easier for her, since all forms of wandless magic would come more naturally to her now. Hermione snorted. It amazed her that she could do Occlumency and Legilemency naturally, but would never be able to light the tip of a wand.

Of course, now everything she knew about wand motions and incantations was useless. Oh she could help others with their wand gestures as much as she pleased, but her knowledge would be of no help to her. Her ability to read and remember was just as useless in that regard as well-- what was the point of reading books on spells she would never be able to cast? What was more upsetting, was there were hardly any books in existence that could tell her anything about wandless magic, and she had no way of getting hold of them.

Then there was Harry. It had been strange to wake up sharing a bed with him, as well as being extremely awkward. Not to mention how hard it was to get him out of bed. She had given him several wake up calls before while at the Weasleys and at Hogwarts in the other time, but for some reason he really didn't want to get out of her bed that morning. His fuzzy reply had been "Dunwanna, m'warm" when she told him to get up. Remus and Sirius had given them strange looks after they finally got out of bed, but said nothing.

A knock at the door pulled her from her thoughts. "Come in!" She called.

Harry pushed the door open, his expression mortified. "Hermione, I need help." Sure enough, Harry needed as much help as she had needed a few minutes ago. Before she could speak, Harry took in her altered robes. "Why do you get to look pretty and I have to look like a banana?"

Hermione smothered a grin. Harry did indeed look like a banana-- his robes were a vibrant yellow complete with white ruffles, topped with his black hair. It was rather funny. "Oh, Harry," she bit her lip to keep from laughing. "My robes were horrible as well, so I changed them. Here, let me fix yours. At least you don't have to deal with lace like I did. Now, what color would you like?"

"Any color you think would look good, Hermione," he said, relieved. Hermione smiled at him and considered what to do. Not black, she decided quickly, remembering the Dark Harry. Definitely not black. In the end, she decided to go with a dark blue, before she shrunk the ruffles until they were barely noticeable. It seemed fitting, somehow, that they should both be dressed in dark colors. "Thanks Hermione!" He said, grinning.

"No problem Harry-- you know I'll always be here to help you out." Hermione saw Harry's eyes soften as she spoke. "Now, we'd better go have a talk with Sirius and Papa Remus about these robes." Harry nodded his agreement and the two set off down the hall to speak with their guardians.

The scene in the kitchen would amuse her for years to come. Sirius was standing with his body at an angle, pointing to what appeared to be scorch marks on his behind. His robes, she noted with interest, were violet. A quick glance revealed Remus was wearing vibrant orange, while Harmony was dressed in neon green. No one appeared happy with their clothes. She did note that their robes were not as... elaborate... as hers or Harry's.

"Personally, Padfoot, I think it's an improvement," Remus was saying. "I don't understand what the Ministry was thinking when they sent us these robes for the ceremony." So Remus didn't pick out the robes.

That was nice to know. Remus looked over at them. "Hey you two, why aren't you wearing the robes I gave you?"

"We are," Hermione grinned. "I just changed them a bit. I refuse to be dressed like a doll."

"And I refuse to be dressed like a fruit," Harry said adamantly. The two older men gave him a strange look. "I looked like a banana."

Sirius looked thoughtful, likely remembering the yellow robes. "I can picture it." He said, nodding. "But that's not fair, you know, that you two get to look decent and we don't."

"You can change your robes to suit your taste. You have wands-- I know for a fact that you, Sirius, went to Diagon Alley today to get a wand and owl treats for Romulus," she nodded to the regal owl sitting on a bust of one of the Black ancestors. Sirius thought the name he chose was hilarious. Remus did not.

Remus shook his head in amazement. "You are something else Hermione. But really, you should change your robes back-- the Ministry will not be pleased that you changed the robes they sent us for the dinner party tonight. It's a long standing tradition that the Ministry provides robes for individuals who are being honored as well as their guests."

Hermione shook her head. "I'm not going out looking like vomit, Harry's not going out looking like a banana, and my sister is certainly not going out looking like a frog," she said determinedly, concentrating on her sister's robes and changing them to periwinkle-- Harmony's favorite color in the other time. She smiled slightly when she remembered picking out periwinkle robes for the Yule Ball in fourth year to remember her sister by.

"What happened Sirius?" Harry said, referring to the scorch marks.

"Kreacher," Sirius snorted. "Rotten elf. I thought he was getting better when he offered to help me with my robes, but I was wrong." He grimaced. "I told him to leave-- I just couldn't stand the sight of him." He looked at the marks on his behind. "I'll have to fix this," he muttered.

Hermione felt her stomach knot. She remembered all too well what happened the last time Kreacher was sent out of the house. She prayed that this time the consequences would not be so severe.

She did note, with much amusement, that as Sirius got rid of the scorch marks, he also changed his robes to black. Remus looked disapproving for several moments, but eventually changed his robes to a gray color.

"Now that I'm not embarrassed to be seen in public or to be seen with any of you, let's go," Sirius said, pulling out a piece of ribbon. "I arranged for us to have a portkey, since you kids need some more practice with the floo. All you have to do is hold this ribbon-- it will do the rest for us. We have about two minutes before it activates, so grab on. You too, Harmony."

Harmony looked up and promptly started chewing on one end of the ribbon. "That's one way of doing it," Remus murmured while Hermione slipped their letters of invitation into her pocket. Knowing Sirius and Remus, they would forget all about them. Returning, she smiled at Harry and grabbed the portkey to wait.

--Malfoy Manor--

Lucius Malfoy paced his rooms angrily. No matter what he did to get control of that filthy little mudblood, he was always thwarted. Oh, how he wanted that little brat! He was no fool, he had seen the way she looked at him. She knew something. He wasn't sure what she knew or even how, but from the way she had acted, whatever it was could be damaging. There was little she could do now, but when she grew older...

He needed to gain control of the wandless whelp, that was all there was to it. Such power... he needed to have it, needed to control it. She knew the secrets of wandless magic, he knew she did. The piece of filth didn't deserve such a gift! It belonged to those of pure descent, those who were her betters, her superiors in every way. He snarled as he remembered that Remus Lupin, a despicable *werewolf* of all things, was granted custody over the girl and her ragtag family.

He had planned to try Legilimency during the hearing to see what he could learn, but once he had looked into her *knowing* eyes, once he witnessed that she *could* control wandless magic, he knew it would be pointless. There was something, some secret about the little monster that he was missing. Furious, he threw his glass of brandy against the wall. What wasn't he seeing?

The sudden tingling told him that his wards had been breeched. "Master," a timid elf named Dobby fairly whimpered, trembling. "The house elf Kreacher of the Black Family wishes to speak with Master's wife."

The Black Family house elf? Lucius grinned maliciously. "Send my wife and the elf to me."

--The Ministry--

It wasn't long before she felt the familiar pulling sensation behind her navel. The group found themselves in a sort of entry hall in the Ministry building. The man waiting for them frowned. "I believe the Ministry sent you robes for this occasion."

"Yes, and we're wearing them. We just changed them a bit. Violet isn't my color, you see," Sirius deadpanned.

The man cleared his throat. "Very well," he said tightly. "You are aware of course that the robes were mandatory?"

"As my friend said, we are wearing the robes the Ministry sent for the ceremony this evening." Remus said in his quiet voice.

"Of course." The man gritted his teeth. "If you would please, give me your letters of invitation and say which guest is with which invitee."

"Um," Sirius began to laugh nervously. "Funny thing, invitations. Always running off--"

"I have them," Hermione said stepping forward. "Sirius Black has chosen to have Remus Lupin as his guest, while I have chosen to have Harmony Granger as mine. Harry Potter has chosen to forgo his right to invite a guest this evening."

The man stared at her open - mouthed. "She has that effect on people," Remus said with a slight smile. "Now if you would, we would like to attend the ceremony."

The man snapped back to attention and led them to a side door. "May I present our special guests of the evening," he announced. "Sirius Black and his guest Remus Lupin, Hermione Granger and her guest Harmony Granger, and Harry Potter." Everyone in the room began to applaud as they entered.

Some of the Ministry officials looked at them with stony expressions when they realized the group wasn't wearing the robes they had sent. One of the officials walked up to them. "Are you aware that you are breaking a longstanding tradition?" He hissed.

"We're not breaking anything. We are wearing the robes you sent, we just changed them. When will you people listen?" Sirius said, rolling his eyes. "Honestly now, does anyone have to know that we changed our robes to suit our tastes?"

"I see you also changed the children's," the man said coolly.

"Actually, I changed them. Now, if you don't mind, we would like to be seated." Hermione interjected as politely as she could. She was having a difficult time keeping herself from snapping at the Ministry representative. She didn't want to be here and was anxious for the night to end.

The man stiffened and glared at the young girl, miffed that she would interrupt what he believed to be an adult conversation. "Very well. Follow me."

"Somebody woke up on the wrong side of the bed this morning," Sirius murmured as he followed the official. Remus shot him a disapproving look and ushered the children along. Harry and Hermione shared a smile as the group followed their guardians. As they went, Hermione noticed many people pointing, staring and whispering. It was getting on her nerves.

“Hermione,” Harry whispered beside her. “Everyone is staring at me again.” His eyes shifted nervously from person to the next. “I don’t like it.”

The young girl sighed. “I don’t like it either Harry, but we can’t do anything about it.” She said agitatedly, glaring at a group of young girls who were staring at Harry and giggling.

“We at the Ministry thought it would be pleasant for the children if we requested the other guests to bring their own children. We have set up a sort of play area for them until the ceremony begins.” The man gestured to a play area with children sitting quietly, staring at each other. “You two gentlemen, I’m sure, would rather spend time with other adults.” Without giving them a choice, he ushered Sirius and Remus, Harmony still in his arms, away, leaving Harry and Hermione behind.

Hermione looked around, taking in the faces of the other children while Harry shifted uncomfortably beside her. She would have to ask him what he had against other children later-- he was glaring at them for no apparent reason.

“Hey!” Someone called, “you’re that girl! You’re the one that came to my house the other night!”

Breaking into a grin, Hermione turned and face Ron Weasley, not seeing the cold glare Harry was giving him. “Hello,” she said smiling. “I’m Hermione, and this is my friend Harry. What’s your name?”

Ron glared at her. “You’re the reason my mum and dad got into trouble. Don’t talk to me!” He snapped, turning away.

“Don’t talk to Hermione like that!” Harry snapped back. “She was just being nice to you, you don’t have to be so mean to her!”

Ron crinkled his nose. “Yuck! You sound like you’re in love with her. Why don’t you just marry her then?”

Harry stood defiantly. “We are married.” Hermione couldn’t stop the furious blush from taking over her face. She loved the boy, but honestly, he had a knack for this sort of thing. “We even slept

together last night.” Now she just wanted to bash her head against the wall.

Ron actually gagged. “You’re a weirdo! You spend time with a girl and you like it!”

“Hey!” A younger version of one of the Patil twins snapped. “There is nothing wrong with spending time with girls, you stupid - head!”

“Yeah,” the other twin nodded. “And hey, you have a sister! You should be nicer to girls.” It was like the floodgates had opened. Every girl in the play area began to tell Ron exactly why it wasn’t bad to spend time with girls. Of course, they fawned over Harry for liking girls, much to his chagrin.

“Are you two really married?” A young Susan Bones asked, her voice awed.

Harry nodded proudly. “Yes we are. We live together.”

Many of the girls actually began to pout. Hermione sincerely doubted that they understood what it meant to be married, but suspected that they wanted to marry the famous Harry Potter anyways. She frowned slightly. She hated how so many people saw him as the Boy Who Lived, and not as Harry.

“When was the ceremony?” Ginny Weasley asked, coming up from behind her brother. Judging from the look on her face, Ginny also wanted to marry Harry. Hermione shook her head in amazement. How was it that a four year old girl could have designs on a boy she had never met?

“Ceremony? I didn’t know there was a ceremony.” Harry said, his eyes wide in surprise.

“Well there you have it,” Ginny said triumphantly. “You’re not married.”

Harry looked ready to cry. “W-we’re not?” He swallowed and was quiet a moment. “Well then, we need to have a ceremony.” He said firmly, standing his ground.

"I'll marry you," Ginny giggled.

"Thanks, but I'd rather marry Hermione." He said simply.

"Hey! What's wrong with marrying my sister?" Ron snapped, his face flushing angrily.

"N-nothing," Harry stammered, "I just--"

"They're Matched." A new voice said. Everyone turned to see sharply dressed Neville Longbottom. "My Gran wanted to Match me with Hermione, but she and Harry are already Matched. He can't marry your sister."

Everyone chorused an understanding. "Why didn't you just say so!" One of the kids said to Harry. Hermione thought it looked like Blaise Zabini of all people.

"Do you really want to have a ceremony?" A girl, who couldn't be anyone other than Pansy Parkinson, asked. "We should really hurry if you do. The grownups will be done pretending they like each other soon." With that, Hermione was whisked away by the other girls to prepare for her 'wedding'. She was so shocked by this turn of events that she numbly did as she was told. A wedding? It was a chilling idea, given last night's dream. Everyone seemed obsessed with the idea, first Neville's Gran, then Harry, now just about every kid in the building. It wasn't that she didn't like Harry, she adored him, but he was five where as she was eighteen. *Eighteen going on seven*, she thought grumpily.

"What's going on?" A small voice asked. The girls turned to see who spoke. Hermione was surprised to see Luna Lovegood, standing close to a woman's side. Hermione looked at the woman standing next to Luna. They looked very much alike, both had straggly dirty-blond hair that fell a little past their shoulders and both had a constant look of surprise on their faces. *Her mother*, Hermione realized.

What had Harry told her? Hadn't he said that Luna's mother had died when she was nine? Yes, her mother was doing some sort of experiment, but it had gone wrong and she had died. Hermione felt a

pang of sadness. Having lost her parents twice now, she didn't want anyone else to feel what she had felt. She would have to find a way to save Mrs. Lovegood's life. Luna was a bit strange, but that didn't mean she should have to lose her mother.

"Harry Potter and Hermione Granger are Matched and are going to get married. Want to help?" Ginny said, smiling. The older woman laughed, shaking her head in amusement as Luna bounded over, returning Ginny's smile and nodding.

"Hmm...you really should be dressed in a lighter color, but we can't change your robes because of the Ministry's rules," Pansy began.

"She needs a veil," Luna reminded them.

"Right!" Ginny nodded. "Here, help me rip this stuff off my robes-- it looks like a veil, and my robes will look better without it." Ginny had a fashion sense when she was four? Amazing.

"You're a Weasley, aren't you?" Pansy asked as Ginny flushed. "Aren't you really poor though? How come you're here?"

Ginny flushed as only a Weasley could while she continued to rip the veil off of her robes. Hermione, still in shock, could only watch the scene play out. "My daddy works at the Ministry, and we saw Hermione once before. My daddy said that they were inviting a lot of people with kids and a lot of people that Hermione might have seen so that she and Harry Potter won't feel so afraid."

Pansy looked thoughtful. "My mum and dad says that Weasleys are a disgrace to the wizarding world, but I think you're really nice."

"Thank you, I think," Ginny said timidly. "Here," she threw the veil over Hermione's head. "This is the best we can do for now. Let's have a ceremony so Harry and Hermione can be married."

Still in a stupor, and trying to figure out just how this had happened, Hermione allowed herself to be led back to where Harry was being thumped on the back by all of the boys. She noted with amusement that they were likely imitating what they had seen grown men doing.

Harry, however, didn't seem to care for everyone hitting his back and saying "way to go!"

"Who's going to be the Priestess?" Hannah Abbott asked.

"I'll do it," Theodore Nott said. "My uncle used to be a Priestess, so I've been to a lot of bonding ceremonies." With that, he tipped over a crate full of toys, stood on top of it and began. "First I need you two to hold each other's hands." Harry immediately grabbed her hands in his.

"I, Blaise Zabini, a grand warlock, have come before you all to say that Harry Potter and Hermione--"

"Hermione," Harry corrected.

"Right, Harry Potter and Hermione Granger wish to bind their spirits as one for all eternity." Blaise continued. "It is within my authority that these two willing souls..."

Hermione glanced nervously around, not listening to the rest of what he was saying. Apparently Blaise *had* been to several bonding ceremonies, because from what she could remember, he was saying the exact ritual, even though he really wasn't a grand warlock. And by now, there were several adults watching her 'wedding'. Even with headmaster was watching, with his eyes just twinkling away.

"Hermione Granger," she looked up as Blaise spoke to her. "Repeat after me. I, Hermione Granger, wish to bind my spirit to that of Harry Potter's."

The young witch swallowed thickly and looked at Harry. She was surprised that he looked happy and was smiling. Looking into his eyes, she felt her six year old heart melt. "I, Hermione Granger, wish to bind my spirit to that of Harry Potter's."

Blaise nodded. "Harry Potter, repeat after me. I, Harry Potter, wish to bind my soul to that of Hermione Granger's."

Harry grinned, bouncing excitedly. "I, Harry Potter, wish to bind my soul to that of Hermione Granger's."

"I need a binding cord," Blaise said to the gathered kids.

"Here," Ron said, pulling a strand of leather lacing from his robes. "Looks girly, anyways," he mumbled, handing the leather to Blaise.

Hermione flushed when she realized that the cord Blaise was wrapping around hers and Harry's hands was red, and distantly wondered if he knew it stood for passion. "With the power invested in me, I know pronounce you, husband and wife. Should you wish to annul your marriage, you must cut your biding cord in half before you consummate your marriage."

"How do we consummate our marriage?" Harry asked, oblivious to the snickering adults listening. "Are you okay?" He asked as she choked. Her face bright red, she could only nod.

"I don't know, I think you have to kiss." Blaise replied.

Harry shrugged. "We can do that," he said. With that, he pulled up her 'veil' and gave her a quick kiss on the cheek.

The children suddenly looked towards the adults at the sound of laughter. The first people she saw were the Weasleys; Molly didn't even seem angry that part of Ginny's robes was thrown over her head. Even the Weasley twins were there, laughing hysterically along with the rest. Hermione was mortified to see Sirius, Remus and Tonks, with Harmony in her arms, laughing so hard there were tears in their eyes.

"Aren't they adorable?" Tonks said mirthfully.

"Come along, you two," Remus finally managed to say. "We need to get back to our table-- the ceremony is due to begin soon."

Harry shot her a puzzled look, clearly not understanding what everyone thought was so funny, but followed his godfather as he tucked the red cord into a pocket. "Let's go, Hermione. These people are weird." He said quietly as he looked nervously around. "They're still staring at me."

Hermione nodded sympathetically--they were staring at her, too. And Harry had dealt with this on a regular basis? She didn't know how he managed to keep himself sane. She was glad that this Harry hated the attention as much as the other Harry she knew.

Lost in her thoughts, she never saw the man blocking her path and walked right into him. "Oh, I'm so sor--ry..." Hermione trailed off as she looked up.

Lucius Malfoy smirked down at the young girl. "Ah, young Miss Granger. I hope you are well," he said, his eyes resting on her necklace.

She panicked. *Does he know?* "Quite well, sir." Hermione said, her voice strained. "Thank you." *Does he know about the necklace?*

"So polite." He smiled condescendingly. "I would like you to meet my son. He's your age, I believe." With a smooth gesture, he indicated the young Malfoy heir. When Draco didn't move, his father pushed him towards her.

Young Draco looked much like his older self. She had thought that his face would be rounder with youth, but it was as pale and pointed now as it was in the future. His eyes were a light gray and had a haunted quality she knew all too well. With a twinge in her heart, she wondered what horrors had put that look in his eyes. Maybe, if he were shown kindness, he could be saved.

Hermione forced herself to relax and smile. "Hello Draco, I'm Hermione. It's a pleasure to meet you." She was so focused on Draco, that she never realized his name had never been spoken and never saw the gleam in Lucius' eyes.

"Lucius, old boy," Sirius said before Draco could reply. "My, I haven't seen you in years. Amazing really. So, how are you treating my cousin?" He looked down at the boy. "And my second cousin. Well, I hope."

Lucius smirked. "Why, I treat them like glass."

Sirius smiled grimly. "Glass breaks quite easily, and is just as easily repaired with the flick of wand."

An icy smile. "I wished to speak with Mr. Lupin in regards to our dear Miss Granger. I had thought to Match her and my son. A strategic Match, I think."

"Sorry to disappoint, Mr. Malfoy, but Sirius and I have decided to match Harry and Hermione," Remus said, appearing beside Sirius.

"Oh? I do not believe such a match has been documented," the blonde man replied.

"We're still working on the contract, but the decision has been made," Remus said, setting his hands on Hermione's shoulders as he engaged in a staring contest with the elder Malfoy. "Well, children, we should be going," he said, breaking eye contact and lifting Hermione into his arms as Sirius lifted Harry. "The ceremony is due to start any minute now."

Hermione was annoyed that they were planning her life for her. If she was going to marry Harry, she wanted to be in love with him when she did it! The Harry she knew now was very sweet and endearing, but he would never be exactly like the Harry she had loved in the other timeline, because he would never live the exact same life. Glancing at her friend, she prayed to whoever was listening that the changes she had made wouldn't change *him* too much. Her task was to keep him from becoming the next Dark Lord, not change his personality entirely.

"Well, here we are," Remus said, setting Hermione in a chair. She sat in the seat indicated by a small card with her name, *Hermione J. Granger*. Words could not express how much she didn't want to be there. Between her faux wedding and the upcoming Ministry surprise, she wanted nothing more than to go to sleep-- she would rather dream of the Dark Harry than be here, and that was saying a great deal about her opinion of the Ministry. Harry didn't look much happier. She gave him a smile, hoping to sooth him a little.

"Witches and Wizards," Fudge said jovially, standing behind a podium. "We have gathered here this fine evening to honor three very special

individuals. Sirius Black,” he paused to allow for applause. “Hermione Granger, the Wandless Witch,” even louder applause, “and Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived!” Deafening applause. “Would the three honorees please come forward,” he said after the applause had died down.

Hermione frowned as she stood again. She had just sat down! Grumbling to herself, she let Sirius take her hand and walked with him and Harry up onto the stage. She really didn’t want to be here.

Standing on the stage, she looked around-- every one was staring at her. A quick glance at Harry revealed he was shifting from one foot to the other, his eyes flickering about the room in an attempt to find a quick escape. Privately, she agreed, but looking around, she could not find a quick escape.

“It is my privilege to present to these three esteemed individuals one of the greatest honors the wizarding world can bestow.

“Sirius Black dared to brave a loyal servant of You - Know - Who to avenge a fallen witch and wizard very dear to our world. For his bravery, we at the Ministry present to Sirius Black the Order of Merlin, First Class! The Ministry also wishes to offer Mr. Black the right to any career of his choosing. The Ministry will help him in anyway possible to attain his chosen career.” There was a loud applause from the audience as Sirius stepped forward and accepted the velvet lined box containing a silver medal and the slip of paper declaring Sirius’ right to a job. When Sirius turned his back to return to his position beside children, he shot Fudge a disgusted look.

Fudge continued. “Hermione Granger, our very own Wandless Witch, at the tender age of six, aided our forces in capturing a servant of You - Know - Who by forcing him out of hiding. For this, the Ministry wishes to present to Hermione Granger, the Order of Merlin, First Class! We at the Ministry also wish to offer Miss Granger right to a job within the Ministry department of her choosing.”

Hermione stepped forward and accepted the black box and slip of paper much like Sirius had. Returning to her place on the stage beside Sirius, she looked at the medal in her hands. It was shining brightly in the magically lit room. The paper documented her right to a

job of her choice. Hearing the roar of applause, she looked up and saw Harry walking back to her and Sirius, a terrified look on his face.

Hermione cocked her head to one side as Fudge droned on about the greatness of the Ministry and how the three honorees deserved these awards. She hated him. Dimly she was aware that she hated things much more now than she ever had before, but she couldn't stop herself. Had the man forgotten that her parents had died less than a week ago? Did he really think that a useless medal and a job would make up for the years Sirius lost to Azkaban? More importantly, did he think his stupid medal was worth hers and Harry's parents?

Gritting her teeth, doing her best to keep a reign on her temper lest she do something to get herself or Remus into trouble, Hermione walked stiffly to the podium where Fudge was speaking. "Excuse me," she said, aware that the audience was watching her, not the Minister. Fudge either didn't hear or didn't care. "Excuse me," she said a little louder, pretending Harry and Sirius weren't looking at her strangely. There was still no reaction from Fudge. "EXCUSE ME!" She yelled.

Shocked into silence, Fudge looked down at her. "Thank you," she said, her voice slightly strained, "but I cannot accept these." Hermione handed Fudge the medal and document. "I have done nothing to earn these."

Fudge began to sputter indignantly. "What do you mean, you--"

"I mean that you are giving me a medal because my magic reacted to being in a strange situation. I did not mean to reveal Peter Pettigrew was still alive. It was an accident. I cannot accept this award for doing something on accident." With that, Hermione turned away and began the trek to where Remus sat, his face beaming with pride.

"I can't accept mine, either," Harry said, stepping forward and handing his awards to Fudge as well. "I haven't earned mine either. I don't know how I stopped Voldemort." Everyone gasped at the mention of the Dark Lord's name. "What? It's just a name, don't be scaredy cats." Hermione beamed at her friend. That was the Harry she knew! The Harry who wouldn't take what he didn't know!

Sirius stepped up to the podium and grinned at Fudge. "Don't worry, I'm keeping mine. I would like to make a little announcement though." Looking at the audience, Sirius smiled winningly. "Good evening everyone. Rest assured, I will be putting my compensation for being unlawfully locked in Azkaban for nearly five years to good use.

"The medal, I'm sure you will all be pleased know will be going to Hermione's puppy, Horace," Sirius said, his smile widening at the look of surprise on many faces. "You see, Horace risked his life to save little Hermione's life, and by saving her life, he allowed her to inadvertently free me from Azkaban. If anyone deserves a medal, it's Horace. Besides, I think it would look smashing on his collar, don't you?

"As for the aid of the Ministry in attaining any job I want, well, I'd like to tell you about that career right now. After much thought and conversation, I have decided to open a school. It has come to my attention that many wizarding families do not have the resources to give their children what is considered to be a proper education. I would like to change that. It is my intention to open a school for children not yet old enough to attend Hogwarts and whose families cannot afford to give them the typical education.

"My partner, Remus Lupin, and I will be looking forward to receiving our permits for such an endeavor, which I know the Ministry will do everything to help me with, thanks the this lovely document provided to me by the Minister himself. I have only one thing left to say." He tucked the Order of Merlin and the parchment into his robes. "I want to tell everyone here this evening that I have never been more proud of my godson Harry and his friend Hermione for what they did tonight."

Hermione grinned at Harry as Sirius stepped away from Fudge and began to walk towards them and began to laugh. Harry and Remus soon joined in. When Sirius reached them, he took Harry and Hermione by the hand while Remus grabbed Harmony. "It's a shame you have to stay Dora. Have fun keeping everyone secure!" Remus said, bouncing Harmony in his arms.

Still smiling, Harry said, "Let's go home." Hermione's smile grew. Home sounded good.

--Malfoy Manor--

Later that evening Draco Malfoy sat heavily on his bed and sniffled. He hated Harry Potter. Everyone loved Harry Potter, and he hadn't done anything. His father said so, and his father was never wrong. Stupid Harry Potter had everything. He even had stuff that belonged to him, Draco Malfoy! Like that girl.

That girl was supposed to be his, his father had said so. His father was even going to Match them, so that he could have her. He didn't know what was so important about that girl, but if his father said that she belonged to the Malfoys, then she belonged to the Malfoys. But Stupid Harry Potter stole her.

Not that he wanted that girl. She wasn't as nice to look at as his mother was. Malfoys, his father had told him, should have pretty things. His mother was pretty. That girl was not. Her teeth were too big and her hair was too bushy. Nope, she wasn't pretty at all. He couldn't imagine why his father wanted to Match them.

She did have a nice smile. She smiled at Stupid Harry Potter a lot, he had seen her do it. He sighed wistfully and wished she would smile at him like that. But no, she was too busy smiling at Stupid Harry Potter to smile at him, even though he was a Malfoy and was *much* better than everyone else. His father said so. He wasn't worried though; his father said he would fix everything and make it right again. Draco lay back on his bed and grumbled.

Stupid Harry Potter.

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A/N: I know, I'm so bad. I took a perfectly fluffy chapter and dragged it through the mud. I had to put the fluff in though, because there's been so much dark stuff going on and there's so much more to come, that I had to put in something silly. Most of this chapter was an experiment; I was playing around with various point of views-- both

Malfoys, little kids, etc. I hope I didn't butcher their characters completely.

There have been some questions regarding Hermione's dream. To prevent further confusion, I'll clarify. When Hermione sleeps, she is seeing what would have happened if the Dark Harry succeeded in bringing her back to life. It sort of serves as a reminder of her task. Yes, Hermione dreams of the other world every night, and no, she will not stop dreaming of the other world. Call it a side-effect, if you wish. The reason I showed the dream was to show that, no matter which timeline you're in, Harry is still Harry. If you need further clarification, feel free to ask and I'd be happy to give you the long-winded version.

Thank you, everyone who took the time to read and review. As always, if you read, please review.

Cheers,

Madm05

Chapter Eight: Family

Eight days. It had been eight days since the debacle at the Ministry. She still could not believe what she had said. It was her only consolation that she hadn't lied, not really. She had said her revealing Pettigrew was an accident, and it was-- she had not planned to expose him so soon. Hermione Granger never made rash decisions; everything she did was thought out. She wanted to plan everything out, consider all the possibilities, and prepare for any problems. Planning was what Hermione Granger did best, well, planning and protecting Harry. That had been the one time she had leapt before she looked. It was her one rash decision. She still wasn't sure if she regretted it or not. She was glad Sirius was free and that Harry was away from the Dursleys, but she feared for the future.

She had made so many mistakes... Sirius and Remus were always watching her, always looking as though they were going to say something, but did not know how to say it. Hermione sighed. Their suspicion would only cause her more problems. She was so sure that if she could destroy the Horcruxes then all would be well, but she would not be able to retrieve them, not with Sirius and Remus always watching her. If she could not destroy the Horcruxes in time, then she would not know how Voldemort would rise again, now that he did not have Wormtail at his beckon call.

That thought brought her thoughts full circle. Her exposing Wormtail was the reason for the ceremony and her subsequent rejection of her award. She still could not believe what she had done, but she had been so angry that she just couldn't keep the medal. It felt wrong to receive an award because she survived and her parents did not.

Her face flaming at the memory of that night, she went back to making breakfast. Six - year - old girls were not allowed to go shopping for their best friends it seemed, so she opted for making Harry his favourite morning foods for breakfast on his birthday. It wasn't the ideal birthday present, but she figured it was a good idea since Harry typically awoke before everyone and made breakfast. She cringed inwardly at the thought of Harry's birthday, her dreams of the Dark Harry still fresh in her mind. They were unforgettable.

Yes, it was much nicer to contemplate bacon, scrambled eggs, and toast than it was to ponder her now official betrothal. Four days ago, Remus and Sirius had sat them down and told them that they had contracted a betrothal for the two of them for their own protection against those who wanted to use them for their fame. "And," Remus had said, "We made it so that if you don't want to get married when you get older, you don't have to. The contract is very flexible." Harry thought it was ridiculous; he firmly believed that they were already married, and refused to be convinced otherwise.

Hermione knew, of course, that arranged marriages were commonplace in some cultures, but the idea was still difficult to wrap her mind around, especially since she was one of the people being contracted. She cringed inwardly as she flipped the bacon. Contracted. It sounded so impersonal, like she was chattel and nothing more.

It was funny in a way. Her childhood goal was to be a spinster-- she didn't want to have to depend on anyone when she grew up. Then she had met Harry; that changed everything for her, and now they were betrothed. She had always loved him, but the way she had loved him changed over time. When she read about him, she loved the idea that a little boy could defeat the most feared man in the wizarding world. When he had come to rescue her from that horrid troll, she loved him as her very first, tried and true, friend. Over time, she loved him for himself, but she had thought it nothing more than hero - worship and began to believe she was unworthy of him. It was always Cho Chang or Ginny Weasley that turned his head, not her. She was Plain Hermione Jane, after all.

She began moving the finished breakfast over to the table, glad that she had the forethought to set out the plates and silverware beforehand. Now she had hope. Harry had wanted the faux wedding, embarrassing as it was, especially with that red cord. It was his idea, and he had followed through with it. He had chosen to 'marry' her, even when Ginny had offered to take her place. She had felt a small glow of triumph at that moment. She doubted Harry really knew what marriage was, but he had still chosen *her* over Ginny.

Hermione looked up as Sirius walked in. "Good morning, Hermione. Did you sleep well?"

She smiled and nodded, glad he did not know Legilimency, or he would know she was lying. Her dreams, nightmares really, were always filled with the Dark Harry. Last night she had watched as he made Delores Umbridge write 'I will not look like a Toad' over and over with the same quill she had made Harry use to write lines, then punished her for not changing her appearance to something less toad-like. The night before she had listened to the sweet words he whispered into the ear of her other self. But as she couldn't tell Sirius about the Dark Harry's torture sessions and his seduction of her older self, she just smiled and nodded.

Sirius looked over the meal she had prepared and gave her a strange look. "Say, where did a little girl like you learn how to cook?" He asked.

Hermione felt a twinge in her chest. "I used to cook with my mother," she replied quietly. Sirius nodded and said nothing more, not wanting to bring up any more memories. Family was a very touchy topic for the young witch, so the others in Grimmauld Place never brought it up if it could be avoided. It hurt her even more to know that she had memories that really had not been created yet, like the time she had accidentally set the stove on fire when she was nine. It hurt more to know that she had robbed Harmony of the chance to get to know how wonderful their parents were...

Horace trotted in, breaking her from her thoughts. She smiled at the gleaming Order of Merlin spelled to stick to stick collar-- she still could not believe Sirius had given it to her dog. Horace was soon followed by Remus with Harmony bouncing merrily in his arms. "Is that bacon?" Remus asked, his nostrils flaring.

"Yes, but it's for Harry's birthday so you can't have any yet." Hermione said, giving him a look.

Remus frowned. "Where did you learn--" He drifted off at a look from Sirius. He cleared his throat. "Sleep well?"

“Wonderfully,” she murmured with a small smile. It was disgusting how easy lying was becoming. A small smile tacked on at the end of a small lie, and all was well. Perhaps, she reasoned, it would help her worn guardian to sleep better at night if she lied to him. The thought brought some measure of comfort to her-- it made lying more justifiable, even if only a little. Thankfully, the spells Sirius and Remus cast on everything in her room prevented them from knowing otherwise-- her magic no longer affected anything in her room.

What concerned her more was that it was almost as easy for her to lie as it was for her to hate. She had become so bitter that it frightened her. There were only two things that kept her from going off the deep end; her mission, and Harry himself. Harry was an adorable child, even if he was a little underdeveloped. It was strange to think that he could cook breakfast, but did not really understand what marriage was. Hermione cursed the Dursleys and their ill treatment of Harry as she took her seat.

Hermione poured two cups of juice for herself and Harry. She had found that keeping herself busy dulled her feelings of hatred, and helping Harry learn wandless magic kept her very busy. It would take a while, she was sure, before he can control it completely, but he progressed faster than she thought. Last night he had made the quill he was trying to summon wobble, which considering the good headmaster had not learned even that much control over wandless magic, was quite a large step.

It wasn't long before the object of her thoughts shuffled nervously into the kitchen. Harry looked around the room and quickly took a seat beside Hermione. “Good morning, Hermione, Sirius, Remus,” he said quietly.

“Happy birthday, Harry,” Hermione smiled.

“Yeah, Happy birthday, Little Prongs,” Sirius said with a grin. “You’re six today. Old enough to--”

“Hush, Sirius. You talk too much,” Remus said and turned to Harry. “Happy birthday, kiddo.”

“Ha!” Harmony chimed.

Harry didn't seem sure how to act. "Thank you," he said quietly, his face flushed with embarrassment.

"Well, let's eat then. Hermione wouldn't let us touch the food until you got here, this being your birthday breakfast and all." Sirius said, reaching for the bacon. The tension broken by the mention of food, everyone grinned and began to eat. Throughout the meal, Sirius and Remus told more stories about their escapades at Hogwarts. Hermione noticed after the third story that they were watching her carefully. It made her uncomfortable. Did they know something?

"Well," Remus sat back once he finished eating. "That was certainly a wonderful way to start the day. You should cook more often Hermione." He grinned as Hermione flushed. "It's a nice day out, why don't you two go play outside? No chores today, as it's Harry's birthday, and the weather is good-- sunshine all day!"

Hermione saw the nervous glance Sirius threw Remus' way and knew the two were planning something. "Of course. Harry and I haven't had the chance to explore outside yet. It should be fun."

Harry nodded. "Yes! That sounds great! Let's go, Hermione, let's go!" He grabbed her hand and all but dragged her outside. "This is great Hermione, no cleaning today! That's the second bestest birthday present I've ever gotten!"

Hermione squinted in the sunlight and frowned in thought. He considered not having to clean a birthday gift? Oh, what she wouldn't give to get her hands on the Dursleys... Wait, second best? Did the Dursleys give him something? "Second best? What's your favourite gift, then?"

Harry grinned at her. "You made me breakfast! No one has ever made be breakfast before, except for that time you mad me toast, and this time you made a big breakfast for me." He looked at her, his eyes shining. "No one had ever done that for me, ever."

She gave him a small, watery smile. "I'm glad you liked it," she said softly, her voice choked. "Hey, do you want to play a game?" Hermione asked, changing the topic.

“Yeah! That grass over there is really tall, it’s reminds me of jungle! Do you want to pretend to be animals? I want to be a lion, so I can be big and be a hunter. What do you want to be?” He asked excitedly.

Hermione wondered briefly if she should tell him that it was lionesses who did the hunting for the most part, and that the males were really very lazy, but she didn’t want to spoil his fun. “I’ll be an antelope.”

Harry looked at her funny. “An antelope? Is that like a really big ant?”

Fighting a smile, she replied, “No it’s what lions eat. You can be a lion and I will be an antelope. We can play chase.” *What am I getting myself into? I’ve never played chase before in my life!*

Harry looked deep in thought for a moment then nodded. “Okay. Rawr!” And so the chase began. Hermione hadn’t realized that Harry was just as agile as a child as he had been in the other timeline. In the end, she resorted to using her vast intelligence to outsmart him by hiding. Though she had never been athletic, she had never had so much fun running in her entire life.

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In the kitchen, Remus watched Harry chase Hermione all around the yard, never managing to catch the young witch. “They’re quite the pair, aren’t they?” Remus murmured.

“Yeah,” Sirius grinned. “They can certainly bring out the wild side in each other, that’s for sure. I don’t think either of them has ever been this active.”

Remus nodded. “I know. It makes me wonder...” He trailed off and shook his head absently.

“Wonder what, Moony?” Sirius asked.

The werewolf sighed heavily. “It makes me wonder what--”

“Filth! Be gone from this house! Let there be no impurity cross my threshold, out with you, scum of the earth!” A voice screeched.

"Mother," Sirius muttered and set off down the hall. "The silencing charm must have worn off of that stupid painting."

"A plague upon you, for dirtying my house!" Mrs. Black snarled as the two men entered the foyer. Scrambling about, trying to pick up a potted plant was Nymphadora Tonks. *"Despicable creature, leave, I demand it!"*

Sirius leapt over his cousin and shut the curtains, quickly casting a silencing charm. "Miserable hag," he muttered and turned to Tonks. "Hello Dora. You're early. Harry's party isn't until later."

"I know," Tonks said, wincing as Remus pulled her up. "I thought I could come over early and help you. How's come I never heard her before?" She asked, nodding to the covered portrait.

Remus sighed. "We generally put a silencing charm on the curtains, but it's getting to be bothersome. The magic just won't stick to them, so we have to recast the charm every twenty hours or so. It's kind of pesky."

"I'll bet. Well, let's get started preparing for Harry's party. So, what were you two talking about?" Tonks asked.

"Moony here was about to tell me what he was wondering about." Sirius said as they entered the kitchen.

"Yes, well, I was saying that I wonder what those two have seen in their lives to make them act as they do," Remus said quietly.

Tonks looked out the window and watched Harry chase Hermione around a tree. "You mean what makes them so mature and naïve at the same time? I wondered about that myself."

Sirius frowned. "You're not saying there's anything wrong with my godson, are you?"

"No," Remus said, putting Harmony in the playpen set up in an out of the way corner of the kitchen. "We're saying that Harry and Hermione are very mature for their age, and we wonder why that is. Maturity typically comes from hardships, and hardships come from age. Come

on Sirius, you've seen how strange he acts, so stop denying it. Don't you wonder what he's been through, what he's seen?"

"And the same for Hermione. Harry at least acts like a kid some of the time. Hermione, now that girl acts like a young woman trapped in the body of a six year old kid." Tonks said, nodding her agreement as she began searching for ingredients to bake a birthday cake.

Sirius and Remus shared a look. "Well, we think we may know why Hermione is so mature."

Tonks looked up from the eggs she was counting for the cake. "What?" She asked, accidentally knocking one of the eggs off the counter. With a small groan, she cast a quick scourgify.

Remus nodded to Sirius. "We, Remus and I that is, think Hermione is a Seer." He said and began listing the various things that led them to their conclusion, from Hermione's understanding of the Pureblood - Mudblood conflict to her knowing how Harry liked his toast.

Tonks whistled. "Yeah, that would mature a kid pretty quick. Do you think she can control it?"

Remus shrugged. "We don't know. Hopefully, when she goes to Hogwarts, the professor there can help her."

"Only if this Trelawny is better than Wiggsworth was. That woman had no idea what she was talking about. Doesn't it figure she would retire the year we graduate?" Sirius said, looking at the cake recipe with something akin to fear.

"I can't help you, I took Muggle Studies, so I never had her. A lot of the Gryffindor girls who had her adored her and thought she was the next Circe or something, but some of the others thought she was a joke." Tonks said with an apologetic look.

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it, I guess." Remus sighed, hunting for a mixing bowl.

Tonks pondered a moment. "Oh, do you think she knew her parents were going to die?"

Remus sighed heavily. "I certainly hope not. It would be horrible if she knew her parents were going to die."

"Mmm" Sirius hummed, nodding sadly.

"So, any theories about Harry?" Tonks asked.

"Theories aplenty, but nothing concrete. The only thing we know for sure is Hermione is his favourite person in the world, and he's disgustingly good at cooking and cleaning." Sirius looked up from the recipe. "What's a tsp?"

"It's a teaspoon." Remus replied, pouring flour into a measuring cup.

"Well why didn't they just say that?" Sirius muttered and began rummaging through a cabinet, glancing at the recipe every few seconds. "As I was saying, Harry is good at cooking and all that, so I think those damned Dursleys worked him like a house elf."

"I don't know, Padfoot," Remus said. "You said he was locked in a cupboard when you arrived, right? I hate to say it, but I think they may have done more than work him like an indentured servant."

Sirius growled deep in his throat. "You don't think they beat him, do you?"

"Who knows what they did, but from what I've heard, I wouldn't be surprised." Tonks said, cracking eggs into a bowl. "Merlin's beard!" She cursed. "Will one of you help me? I accidentally dropped eggshells into the mix."

"Here, let me." Remus began reaching for the eggshells, his hand colliding with Tonks' as she grabbed at a shell. "Sorry," he said, face red.

Sirius didn't notice the exchange. "Oh, what I would do if I could get my hands on them. I think they may have starved him, considering how skinny he was, but I'm not sure. James was a skinny kid when he was younger, so it may just be that." He pulled several bottles out of the cabinet and carried them over to the table. "Still, the way he eats food like he thinks we'll take it away..." He trailed off.

"I know," Tonks nodded. "I noticed it too, but I didn't want to bring it up. Do you think we'll ever find out?"

Sirius looked out the window, watching Harry tackle Hermione. "Rawr! I'm a hungry lion and I'm going to eat you!" Harry shouted over Hermione's giggles.

"No, I don't think we will. Harry's not going to tell us, and I don't have the heart to ask him to tell me his darkest secrets." The man said quietly. Remus and Tonks nodded and the trio went back to working on Harry's birthday cake.

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Some time later, Harry and Hermione smelled something burning. Sniffing, the two sat up from their resting place in the shade of a tree. "What is that?" Hermione asked, her nose wrinkling.

Harry frowned and looked towards his home. "I don't know, but I think it's coming from the house. Let's go check it out." He stood. "Stand behind me, just in case." Hermione smiled as she followed him.

He was so heroic, even as a child. Harry opened the back door, only to jump back as black smoke poured out. "Put it out! Put it out!"

"I'm trying to, Padfoot!"

"Will you two blokes stop prancing about? Move over, wait, where's my wand? Ouch! Sirius!"

"It wasn't me, I'm over here! It was Moony!"

"Sorry Dora!"

Finally, as the smoke began to clear, Hermione and Harry saw what the three grownups had been up to. They had been trying to make a cake. They had failed miserably. "What is that?" Harry asked, pointing at the black lump Tonks had just pulled out of the oven.

"It's a cake." She replied.

"That doesn't look like any cake I've ever seen. Do you want me to make a cake? I know how." Harry said.

"I'll help," Hermione chimed. "What happened?" She asked as she and Harry set to work cleaning the kitchen so they could begin work on the cake.

"Well," Sirius sighed, "we were going to make you a birthday cake, but we lost track of time. We were sitting in the family room playing with Harmony and completely forgot about it until we smelled something burning. I'm sure you can guess the rest."

Harry and Hermione shared a look before they began laughing merrily. It hadn't taken the children long to put together the cake mix, much to the chagrin of their guardians. The two chuckled over the matter as they worked, and soon their cake was in the oven. Their task done, they shared a smile and talked about what game they were going to play when they went back outside as they waited for the cake to finish baking.

"Well, so much for a birthday surprise," Sirius sighed as he sat with the other adults on the other side of the kitchen.

"We tried," Remus nodded.

"I can't believe we were outdone by a couple of kids," Tonks said, bouncing a giggling Harmony on her knee.

Remus waived her comment away. "I'm getting used to it. Hermione's always outdoing someone, be it Mr. Malfoy or the Ministry."

"Personally, I can't wait for her to go to Hogwarts. She'll be lying to teacher and brewing illegal potions by second year, mark my words." Sirius said. "Makes me proud."

"She'll be quite the Marauderette, won't she? And Harry is going to be a handful-- I think he acts more and more like James everyday." Remus smiled. "So we have a Mini - Moony and a Little Prongs. It's a shame we don't have a Baby Padfoot." He grinned at Sirius, who only snorted in reply.

Once the cake was done, the day itself was spent outside for the most part. The adults had a great deal of fun watching Harry chase Hermione. It was an interesting show, with Harry's agility versus Hermione's intelligence. Neither of them could gain the upper hand for very long.

They stopped for a family picnic, all of them telling funny stories. Harry even chipped in his belief that Dudley was a pig in a wig. When lunch was over, they all joined for a game of hide - and - seek, with the adults taking turns switching out to watch Harmony. It was quite a while before they all went back inside.

"Surprise!" A man and a woman Hermione didn't recognize shouted as they walked in.

"Andy! Ted! Were you able to get in okay? No problems?" Sirius grinned as he pulled them into a quick embrace.

"None, oh, and these must be the children Nymphadora is always raving about. They're so adorable! You two must be Harry and Hermione, right? Where is the baby? Her name is Harmony, right?"

"Nymphadora? Your name is Nymphadora?" Harry asked his face puzzled.

Tonks cringed. "Yes, but please, call me Tonks or Dora."

"Now, Nymphadora," Andromeda Black began.

"Mum, Dad, this is Harry, Hermione, and that cute little baby Remus is holding is Harmony, Hermione's baby sister." The auror in training interrupted. "Harry, Hermione, these are my parents, Andromeda and Ted Tonks. They made your birthday dinner Harry."

Harry turned to the couple. "Thank you very much for dinner."

The couple laughed. "Well I couldn't leave you to eat the food these three would have made, could I? They're hopeless in the kitchen. What have you bee eating?" Andromeda asked.

"Sandwiches," Harry replied. "Sometimes Sirius goes and gets food from the Leaky Cauldron since we can't go out often because people really like us, I guess." He paused. "Sometimes I cook."

"I see," she looked around. "It looks like they at least managed to make a cake without turning it into a lump of charcoal, so they must be improving." Andromeda never saw the looks Remus, Sirius and their daughter exchanged, nor did she hear Harry and Hermione's snickers.

"Harry, Dora and Andy are my cousins, so that makes them your family too, that's why I invited them over. That and Andy is a great cook," he winked. "Let's eat!" Dinner turned out to be even better than lunch, as Ted and Andromeda knew all of the embarrassing stories about Tonks and Sirius that the two were unwilling to tell.

Just as Sirius and Remus were preparing to get their presents for Harry, there was a knock at the door. "I'll get it," Tonks said, standing. "Don't start anything without me."

Several moments passed before Tonks returned, her expression grim. Her shoulders slumped, she stepped aside, allowing Lucius Malfoy to enter the room followed by ten aurors.

"Who are they?" Harry asked Tonks as he looked at the men gather behind Malfoy.

"Aurors," she replied stiffly.

"Horrors?" He asked, puzzled.

"Yeah, they're Horrors, alright," Sirius murmured.

"Mr. Lupin," Lucius began, smirking. "It was declared by the Wizengamot that you would be watched carefully while you were the guardian of one, Hermione Granger. Members of the Wizengamot have received intelligence that you have not been following the proper code of conduct as a guardian."

"And what have I done wrong?" Remus asked, his voice hoarse and his face pale. Hermione felt her stomach knot. This was bad.

"You have used a power dampener on a child. This calls into question both your parenting techniques and your ethics. However, since it is only Hermione Granger that you have wronged, you may keep custodial care of Harmony Granger and her dog." He smirked. "Custody of our dear Wandless Witch has been granted to me, though." Lucius looked down at her. "Come along, my dear."

Arguments flared up, but Hermione never heard them. Fear gripping her, she stood from her chair and backed away. She knew they were arguing over her, but the only thing the young witch could see was Lucius Malfoy drawing nearer-- she had been so focused on his face that she never saw the flick of his wand. She felt, rather than saw that he had summoned her necklace.

The effect was immediate. The tingling came back with a vengeance, causing her to sway dangerously. *Something's wrong*, she thought dimly. *I shouldn't be reacting this way. I was in Diagon Alley and I didn't react like this.* She crashed to her knees. *He's done something.*

"Come now, my dear girl. I'll take you to a place where you can develop *all* of your unique *gifts* and *talents*." Lucius smirked as he lifted her off the floor. The tingling was so intense that she couldn't fight back. "Don't worry Sirius, old boy," he looked back as he walked to the kitchen doorway. "I'll treat her like glass."

Hermione watched as Sirius, Remus, Dora and the rest of the Tonks' argued with the aurors, but she couldn't make out what was said... everything was so fuzzy... was Harmony crying? She couldn't concentrate...

"Hermione!" Someone called. She knew that voice... "Hermione, don't! Please don't go!" Was that Harry? Hermione looked up, seeing her sweet Harry running after her down the hall. Weakly, Hermione reached out to him, whimpering softly. Harry would save her. He was her hero. But then Sirius appeared and caught Harry around the waist. He was saying something in Harry's ear, but she couldn't tell what. She could tell, however, that Harry was crying.

A moment later, she felt as if she were being pressed very hard from every side, a very unpleasant sensation when combined with the intense tingling she felt. *Apparation*, she thought.

--In the Kitchen--

"My-My! My-My! My-My!" Harmony wailed, tears streaming down her face.

"Hush, little Harmony," Andromeda soothed the child while her own daughter argued with one of the aurors. "We'll get your sister back."

"What do you mean he had the right to take Hermione? Doesn't there have to be a hearing?" Sirius snarled.

"Mr. Malfoy approached the Minister with information provided by an occupant of this house that Miss Hermione Granger was being mistreated but the unethical use of a power dampener." The commanding auror said.

"Mistreated? Are you daft man? Did you not see what happened to the girl when the power dampener was removed?" Remus asked in his quiet voice, his face stricken.

"I did not," the auror replied.

"I did," another auror said formally, stepping forward. "I witnessed Mr. Malfoy summon the power dampener in question, and saw the girl's reaction." He dropped the formal tone. "She collapsed, Sir. The poor kid looked like she'd been through the ringer a couple of times. I don't know why she was wearing that dampener, but I think she needed it"

"Hermione is very sensitive to all forms of magic," Remus sighed. As her guardian... former guardian... it was his duty to tell them why she needed to wear the necklace. "Because of her sensitivity, she can feel it at all times and can, and has been, overwhelmed. That is why she wears the necklace, so she can go out into the wizarding world without fainting."

The commanding auror ran his hand through his hair. "The only thing I can tell you to do is petition to appeal the decision. I didn't see it, so I can't help, but ," he nodded to the second auror to speak, "Auror Rowan can testify on your behalf. Best guess is it will take you eight days to get custody again, at least, that's how long it took Mr. Malfoy's petition to go through."

The five adults shared a look as Harmony continued to wail Could Hermione survive the Malfoys for eight days?

--Harry's Room--

Harry easily slipped away from the adults and paced back and forth across Hermione's bedroom. It wasn't fair! How could Sirius stop him? He was so close to Hermione, but Sirius hadn't let him follow her. She hadn't wanted to leave, otherwise she wouldn't have reached out for him. Grownups just didn't understand.

He was so angry the mirror shattered. He looked up, confused. Hadn't Sirius and Remus put charms on all of Hermione's things? Harry felt a glow of hope. He had just done very powerful wandless magic, and if he could learn to control it, he could go save Hermione. He had to learn to do wandless magic and fast, because that blonde man didn't seem very nice.

Sitting on his best friend's bed, Harry concentrated on the little blue dog, willing it to come to him.

--Malfoy Manor--

Finally the painful sensation of apparation stopped. Feebly lifting her head, Hermione found herself in a receiving room much like the one at Grimmauld Place, though far more ornate. She was in Malfoy Manor.

"Ah, I see you have the little Mudblood. Did she cause you much trouble?" A woman who could only be Narcissa Malfoy said.

"Hardly," he smiled darkly. "It was rather easy, actually. Now, wife, I've work to do. Send Draco to me in an hour. It is high time he began practicing his lessons on something bigger than spiders." Malfoy began weaving his way through the huge manor, taking so many turns that Hermione knew it was fruitless to try to remember them all. *He has to be wearing something that's affecting me like this, but what is it?* As they walked into yet another room, Hermione suddenly felt the tingling intensify tenfold-- she wished the tingling would cause her to faint, if only to make it stop. She looked around but she couldn't see anything in the room, it was so dark.

Lucius dropped her on the ground, only to grab her hair and pull her to her feet. "What do you know?" He demanded. "You know something, you insufferable tart, and you're going to tell me. I know all about your skills, all about your ability to sense magic and your gift of foresight! Tell me what you know!"

Foresight? What is he talking about? Defiant, Hermione glared weakly at him. "I wouldn't tell you the time of day if my life depended on it."

Lucius Malfoy knelt down next to her, staring deep into her eyes. Hermione felt him brush against her thoughts before her magic reacted and roughly pushed him from her mind. He paused. "Oh, but my dear girl," he touched her cheek in a mocking caress. "You will tell me everything I wish to know and more." He slapped her hard, drawing a trickle of blood. "You will tell me everything, if only to make the pain stop."

He smiled wickedly at her. "If you're a smart girl, you'll learn your lessons quickly. Since this has no doubt been an *emotional* day for you, I will give you an hour to prepare for your first lesson." He let her fall to the ground. "Don't worry, pet, as soon as you're house trained, I'll let you out of your cage." With that, he turned away and swept from the room.

Hermione looked up, her eyes straining against the light from the hallway-- the only source of light in the whole room-- and watched him go. How could this have happened?

"Oh, one more thing, pet." He turned and smiled maliciously. "Welcome to the family." The door slammed shut, and Hermione's world faded to black.

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A/N: Please don't flame me, but I had to, really. Honest. Something important is going to happen. In my defence, at least I wrote lots of fluff before hand. Oh, and I'm very sorry this is so late, but the Document Manager was being moody.

The conversation between Tonks, Remus and Sirius while they were making a cake was a nod to everyone who thinks that Harry suffered more than the books let on. I generally try to write canon (strange, considering some of what I've written), so I had to leave it open ended about what Harry really suffered, since I don't know.

To my anonymous reviewer Regina, would you please give me your e-mail? I have a few questions I would like to ask you about your challenge. If you don't want to send it in a review, feel free to send it to me in a private message through my profile.

Well, as always, I would like to thank everyone who read, and give special thanks to those who reviewed. Even if you're mad that Hermione is with the Malfoys, please review.

Cheers,

Madm05

Chapter Nine: Invictus

Think of Harry. The words had become a mantra that she chanted religiously to keep herself sane. All three Malfoys came to her room whenever they wished, paying little mind to the hour, to torment her and to teach her what her rightful place was in the wizarding world. The fates were mocking her. Even when she slept there was no respite; she saw only the horrors the Dark Harry inflicted on others. There was no peace for her in her prison. It was her twelfth day in Malfoy Manor, and she was sure the day was drawing to a close. Soon, she knew, it would be the thirteenth day of her stay. Hermione prayed that someone would come and free her soon. The Ministry, of course, hadn't bothered to check on her to be sure she was well cared for.

When the room was lit her first fateful night at Malfoy Manor, she had discovered the room she was kept in was filled with magical objects, each spelled to be indestructible and unmovable. The long exposure to so much magic had caused the constant tingling to become a constant ache deep in her bones, making it hard for her to move or to focus her magic. If she were to admit the truth, even the simplest of movements caused her a great deal of pain.

The Malfoys had cleverly chosen to put just enough magical objects in the room to keep her from passing out. It had taken time for them to figure out what was enough to keep her from moving easily and not let her faint, but they had managed. There were no chains or manacles in the room, but she was bound all the same. *Bound by my own magic, no less. Oh, the irony.*

The room itself was rather large. The walls were lined with shelves of magical objects, and on either side of the door were two suits of armour, each holding a spear. At the far end of the room was a small window with thick curtains that blocked most of the light during the day. If she was a good girl and learned her lessons, she was told, she would be allowed to have some light.

Next to the window was a small cot. If she were a good girl and learned to control her ability to sense magic, she was told, she would be able to walk there herself and sleep there instead of on the floor.

Hermione snorted softly in remembrance. She had managed to crawl there on her second day, only to have the cot disappear and reappear on the other side of the room. When she had crawled to her new destination, the cot had returned to the window. And so Hermione lay on the floor in the middle of the room, no longer caring about the cot. She was well acquainted with the floor now, and no longer minded sleeping on the hard stones. Besides, it hurt to move.

She had never felt so dirty in all her life. Her hair was an uncombed, unwashed mess, and her clothes were rumpled from being worn her entire stay so far. Clean clothes, she had been told, were only for smart girls who learned their lessons. Hermione, shining in all of her Gryffindor glory, had yet to learn even the first lesson-- she refused to call anyone Master.

The Malfoys were cruel but intelligent people. As much as she hated to admit it, Lucius Malfoy was a genius. He had devised a spell that would heal any wounds he inflicted but left her to suffer in pain as if they had never been healed. That morning he had broken all of the fingers on her left hand while trying to get her to tell him her secrets before he was called away. The bones were repaired now, but still pulsed with pain when she even thought about moving them, it seemed.

They all had their own unique ways of torturing her, too. Narcissa Malfoy tended towards insults, rather than spells, but the result was often just as damaging. The Mistress of Malfoy Manor questioned her courage, asked her what she had done to save her parents the night they died. *Nothing*, she would think bitterly. *I did nothing*. It had hurt on so many levels, knowing that they would still be alive if she had not saved Horace's life, or that they might have been saved if she had done more than sit in Harmony's room.

Draco also caused her heart to ache-- it pained her to know that there had never really been a chance for him in her own time. He had been learning the Dark Arts from such a young age, there was very little hope of saving him. She wondered what he may have been like if he had been born into a kinder family. *Who knows? Maybe he would have been a Hufflepuff.*

Lucius himself turned the act of inflicting pain into an art form. Every day he would enter her prison and demonstrate for his son a new spell to learn. In private, however, when he was trying to learn her secrets, he used a much wider variety of methods. His favourite method, or so he had told her, was breaking each bone in each of her fingers, starting with her left pinkie and working his way right. Lucius Malfoy was very methodical. He had done it several times already, and still she refused to speak.

Yet despite her daily torture sessions, she actually was cared for-- all of her needs were met, at least. After each of her so - called lessons, her body was healed, even if the pain did not leave. Dobby had been sent in every evening to clean her, but she still felt dirty. There was something about taking a bath that was so much more cleansing than a cleaning charm to her.

Dobby also entered her room three times a day to feed her. Hermione always ate what he brought her, knowing he would be punished if he failed in his task. She was Hermione Granger, the champion of house - elves however, and she would do her best to let no harm come to Dobby because of her. He had been very kind to her when he came to feed and clean her, as it was painful for her to move on her own. The two had become friends, and that annoyed the Malfoys even more.

She took great pleasure in defying the Malfoys. It seemed there was a look of constant annoyance on Lucius Malfoy's face when he came to give her a 'lesson' after she ate. It really irritated them that she would eat when Dobby asked her too, but refused to do anything they demanded of her. But her small victory over them was always followed by a great deal of pain.

And so her body was beaten, broken, and repaired again and again by the creative spells the Malfoys sent her way. Her heart ached from the words Mrs. Malfoy cast at her as deftly as any spell. Yet through it all her soul remained unconquered. *They'll get me out of here soon. I'll have to thank Harry when they do free me, for keeping me sane.* While the Dark Harry was her damnation, young Harry was her salvation.

The door creaked open. Looking up, Hermione saw Draco Malfoy, framed by the doorway and the light beyond. This was unusual, considering Draco usually only came in with his father for some of his lessons in how to deal with people of her 'station'. As he entered the dark room, several orbs of light followed and moved to strategic places around the room to create a dim light in the space. He was silent, just staring at her for many long moments before he finally spoke. "Smile." He said simply.

Hermione him a strange look. Smile? He wanted her to smile? She was a prisoner, for Merlin's sake! If she wouldn't call him Master, what made him think she would smile on command? "No," she replied, her voice hoarse from her last 'lesson'.

Draco's face turned an angry shade of red. "I said smile! You smiled a lot for *him*, now smile for me!"

"I'm sorry," Hermione replied calmly, wondering distantly who *him* was, "but you must have me mistaken for a dog. This may shock you, but I'm a person, not an animal." She looked up at him; his face turned an even deeper shade of red as he clenched his hands at his side.

"You filthy little Mudblood! I said smile!" Draco snarled.

Hermione smiled serenely. She didn't smile because he commanded it; she smiled because it was a piece of her old life, that remark. Even with as horrible as her life was right now, it was strangely comforting to hear Draco Malfoy call her a Mudblood. It was comforting to know that some things wouldn't change. She looked up from her place on the floor, her eerie smile still in place. Draco shifted uncomfortably.

"Funny you should call me a Mudblood," she said quietly. Hermione bit her lip as hard as she could, drawing blood. Dragging her hand towards her mouth, she weakly smeared blood on it. "For all of the mud that flows in my veins," she held her hand up for him to see, "my blood is as red as yours."

Draco looked confused for a moment then stormed out of the room. *Either I got through to him, or he's gone to tell his father.* All things considered, Hermione expected Malfoy Senior to arrive any moment.

She relaxed her body as best she could and began to picture Harry's face, recalling their game of chase. If she concentrated, she could hear his laughter as he chased her through the tall grass. It was her only defence against her tormentors, and she thanked whoever may have been listening for her Occlumency. Harry was her safety net, and if Malfoy ever found a way to take her memories of him... Hermione shuddered. If it weren't for Harry, she was certain Malfoy would have broken her by now.

Preparing herself for what was coming, she summoned forth her favourite memories of her dearest friend. She remembered the time he rescued her from that horrid troll, then how happy she had been when he had solved the riddle and defeated the basilisk in the Chamber of Secrets. She recalled with crystal clarity riding on Buckbeak with Harry to rescue Sirius, and her pride in Harry when he finally learned the summoning charm.

The door creaked open again, revealing both Draco and Lucius. "Up for another round so soon?" Hermione goaded, her voice still hoarse. Malfoy - baiting was the only form of entertainment to be had. *Besides, she consoled herself, he won't do anything permanent, he won't do anything that will risk his role as my guardian. He's going to hit me with all sorts of nasty spells anyways, I might as well do something to deserve them.*

It was foolhardy of her, she knew, but part of her hoped one day he would get so angry he would make a mistake that would somehow lead to her freedom. *Maybe today he'll hit himself with one of his own curses,* she thought darkly.

Lucius sneered and delivered a harsh kick to her ribs. Hermione gasped in pain. She knew full well she was inviting his wrath, but the way she looked at it, she needed to get her fun when and where she could. She didn't want to consider that she had simply been on the receiving end of the Cruciatus Curse too many times and had lost her common sense. "Fighting like a muggle, are you? Your mother must be so proud." She braced herself for the pain she knew would come.

Normally, Hermione Granger loved to be right. It was one of her greatest pleasures in life.

“Crucio!”

But nowadays she hated it.

Think of Harry.

--

Remus looked horrible. In fact, he hadn't looked this bad since James and Lily had died that fateful Halloween night. His clothes were wrinkled, his face was haunted, and he desperately needed to shave. He downed the last of his drink and looked down at the large pile of papers. There was so much work yet to be done.

Long past the point of exhaustion, Remus gave his eyes a brief rest and looked at his companions. To his right were the Tonks'. Ted, Andromeda and Dora were all going through wizarding law books, trying to find a loophole. Poor Dora had been fired yesterday for no reason at all, though they suspected Malfoy was behind it. The only part she had been able to catch was something about a conflict of interests and bringing her home life to work.

To his left was Sirius, who was furiously writing letters to his contacts with Horace whimpering at his feet. Horace hadn't been very active since Hermione had been taken away, and spent most of his time lying on the floor, whining. Even his Order of Merlin had lost its shine. Sirius had decided it was time to take a more political stand and to bring honour back the name of Black. Harmony was sleeping fitfully in her crib. An intelligent baby, she cried often, and screamed “My - My!” in hopes her sister would come to her. He, himself, was filling out paperwork.

Harry was in Hermione's room, doing what, nobody knew. The adults were all worried about him, since he had only left Hermione's room to eat and relieve himself since she had been taken, but there was little they could do for him. Harry had even refused to open his birthday presents until Hermione was home again. They could only pray she would be returned to them soon.

No matter what they did, Malfoy thwarted them at every turn. Sirius was putting everything he had into getting Hermione back though. He

was calling in old debts and favours left and right, and practically pouring galleons into the laps of the same Wizengamot member Lucius had. He was also keeping a recording of his conversations with those who admitted to accepting bribes from Malfoy.

It seemed he had paid off more than half the Wizengamot, and played a sympathy card with the public by having the *Prophet* print articles about how Hermione had been living with a werewolf. In fact, he and Sirius had been hiding the *Prophet* from the kids for fear that they would see all of what he was dealing with. That was how Malfoy had managed to avoid a second custody hearing-- he simply lined the Wizengamot's pockets with galleons and gained public sympathy so that the public wouldn't care whether or not due process was followed. Nobody cared if a werewolf was cheated. Sirius understood Remus completely, having been in a similar situation himself once.

The werewolf sighed and rubbed his eyes. The eight days the auror commander promised had come and gone-- in another hour the thirteenth day would begin. *There's no rest for the weary*, he thought. Remus turned back to the papers and began work on filing his appeal again.

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Harry smiled. He was finally ready to go get his bestest friend in the whole wide world. He wasn't nearly as good as Hermione was at wandless magic, and he had a horrible headache, but he was sure that he would be able to save her. Harry remembered how she could change the colour and size of things and wished he could do that. It wouldn't help him, but he still thought it was really neat.

He looked around at what he had done. Emerald flames danced on the fabric of her curtains, but never burned a single thread. It was really hard to make them catch fire since Sirius and Remus had put spells on them-- that was probably why the curtains wouldn't burn.

Next he looked at the small object flying in circles around him. It was Hermione's little blue dog Disco, flying clockwise around him. It had taken him a while to make it move, but now he could make it move very fast, and he was very proud of himself.

Using his magic, Harry put the fire out and made Disco fly back to Hermione's bed. Slowly, Harry lowered himself onto the floor from where he had been levitating. He liked being able to make himself float. It was a lot like flying and it was a lot of fun. Hopefully being able to make himself float would help him save his Hermione.

She was right all along, he realized. She had told him over and over that he needed to use an emotion to make things happen. He hadn't understood before, but he did now. He had found a way to use an emotion to use magic. It made him happy to know it would make Hermione proud of him.

Harry looked outside. It was very dark, so it had to be very late. Good. Everyone should be sleeping, so he could go get Hermione and bring her home. It would be a very good surprise for Sirius and Remus and Dora and Harmony. Even Horace would be happy to see Hermione, he was sure.

It was then that he realized, much to his frustration, that he had no idea where Hermione was or how to get to her. He frowned and began to pace Hermione's room angrily. He wanted to go get Hermione and he didn't want to wait any longer. Furious, Harry stomped his foot and disappeared, the sound of wind the only indication of the magic he had cast.

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Think of Harry. Think of Harry. Hermione writhed on the ground, her thoughts focused on her green - eyed friend. The copper tang of blood filled her mouth as she bit through her lip again, trying desperately not to cry out, trying to keep what remained of her pride intact. If she could only hang on until help came. The Divine Beings had given her a mission, surely they would find a way to free her-- she couldn't carry it out if she were dead. *Think of Harry.*

Suddenly Hermione heard a strange noise in the corner of the room. A moment later, Malfoy Senior released his spell. Weakly lifting her head, Hermione looked in the direction of the noise and found herself awestruck. It was Harry! He stood in the corner, one of the orbs of light shining just behind his head, surrounding him in a soft glow. The shadows cast over his face and his grim expression made him look

very much like an avenging angel. Lucius Malfoy stared at the boy who had somehow appeared in his home.

“Don’t hurt my friend!” Harry snapped as he ran at the wizard. Furious, the young boy tackled the older man and knocked them both to the ground, magic forgotten. Angry, Harry flailed and kicked at anything he could. He had never been so angry in all his life-- how dare this man hurt his Hermione!

Lucius seemed to regain his senses and shoved Harry away, knocking him into Draco. The two boys tumbled to the ground in a tangled heap. “Well well, isn’t this quite a surprise? Imagine, the Boy Who Lived dropping in for a visit. I can only imagine you missed your filthy little Mudblood friend and your magic reacted-- you certainly couldn’t have apparated here. Clearly you need a lesson on your proper rank, boy. It doesn’t do for the pure to mix with those less than worthy.”

“Hermione,” Harry grunted as he stumbled to his feet, “Is my friend, you big bully. Leave her alone.” He glared ferociously at the older man.

Lucius smirked. “A lesson, indeed. Don’t worry. I’ll teach you everything you need to know. Who knows? You thwarted my former master; perhaps you could replace him as the new Dark Lord? With the proper training of course. Doubtless, you’ll be a better protégé than my own son. I’ll guide you. I’ll even give you your first lesson now,” he said maliciously as he raised his wand.

Not Harry! Hermione panicked as she lay on the floor. *I can’t let him do that Harry!* If it had been a threat against her, if Malfoy had been talking about teaching her about her rightful place, she would have simply tolerated the pain and waited for someone to save her. She would not, however, tolerate anyone hurting Harry if she could help it. Desperate to protect her friend, she summoned the last of her strength and focused just enough of her magic to knock the wand from Lucius Malfoy’s hand. Exhausted, she let her head drop back down to the ground. Twelve days of torture could really take it out of a person.

Lucius growled in frustration and grabbed at Harry, yanking the small boy up by the collar of his shirt. "I'll teach you, you insolent brat!" He raised his hand and struck Harry hard across the face. A trickle of blood ran down from the corner of his lips.

Hermione pushed herself up just enough to see the look of horror on Harry's face. *The Dursleys*, she realized. *He's probably remembering the Dursleys*. Draco, she saw, had simply been lying on the floor, whimpering and rubbing his elbow. Hermione couldn't help but snort. Throughout her entire stay with the Malfoys, she had endured a wide variety of tortures, and he was whining over hitting his elbow. She supposed her lack of tolerance for his childishness was because he had been a part of the torture sessions.

She looked back to her friend. His eyes wide with fright, Harry did the only thing he could think of. Pushing aside his fear, he swung his body forward and kicked Lucius with all of his might-- right in the groin.

The grown man doubled over in pain and dropped Harry as Draco ran from the room, screaming for his mother. He lunged at Harry, who scrambled away. Furious, he grabbed Harry's ankle as the young boy tried to wriggle away. Harry wiggled, squirmed, and kicked so much that Lucius pulled off his shoe, sock and all.

"Dobby!" He snarled. There was a loud cracking sound like that of a whip as the fearful house - elf appeared. Frustrated, he tossed the shoe over his shoulder and snapped, "Get my wife, elf!" Dobby didn't hear, for the shoe had landed in his arms, the sock still inside.

Still lying on the floor, her upper body propped on her elbow, Hermione felt a glow of triumph. Lucius Malfoy may not have known it, but he had just made quite a mistake; he had presented Dobby with clothes. Harry was slowly wiggling his way towards her. Hermione desperately wished she could reach out a hand to him, but sitting up had sapped a great deal of her strength.

"Dobby, you insolent elf!" Lucius snapped as he grabbed onto the leg of Harry's trousers. "I told you to get my wife! You'll be punished for this!" He began to pull Harry towards him. Harry, frantic to get away, kicked as hard as he could with his other foot, his shoe hitting the older man's nose with a sickening crunch. Lucius growled and

grabbed hold of Harry's ankle. A moment later, he released his hold, howling in agony. Hermione caught a brief glance of his hand-- it looked as though it had been burned.

Free, Harry scrambled over to his friend and pulled her into a hug. The young witch winced in pain. "Hermione! Are you okay?" He asked breathlessly.

"I'm fine, Harry," she smiled tightly, hiding the ache that wracked her body. "We-- we need to get out of here. Now."

Harry looked distraught. "But I don't know how I got here, and I don't know how to get out of here either!" He looked at her, panic reflected in his six - year - old eyes. "What do we do?"

She took a moment to catch her breath. "We have to--" Hermione trailed off as she caught sight of Lucius Malfoy.

His face was white with rage as blood trickling down from his broken nose, and his lips were drawn back in a fierce snarl, a malicious glint in his eyes. "You little fools," he hissed. "Did you think it would be so easy? That I, Lucius Malfoy, could be beaten by mere children?" He raised the wand he had retrieved from the floor and glared at them. "I shouldn't have bothered trying to learn your secrets. You're more trouble than you're worth, the both of you. *Avada--*"

"*No!*" Dobby yelled, running in front of the children. "Dobby is free now, and Dobby doesn't like the way you hurt the little Miss, Dobby doesn't like the way you want to hurt the friend of the little Miss. Dobby won't let you hurt them anymore." The house elf declared defiantly. Instead of replying, Lucius turned his wand on the elf, his face livid.

"No!" Hermione gasped, raising her arm as if to ward off the blow. At the same moment, she felt a surge of strange magic, and with a loud bang, Malfoy flew up into the air, only to be impaled on one of the armour suits' spears when he fell. Harry and Hermione watched in horror as he choked, blood oozing out of his mouth before he drew his final breath.

All was silent for a moment before Harry belatedly put his hand over Hermione's eyes, as though to shield her from the sight. Suddenly, Hermione gasped as a horrible thought flashed through her mind. *It's death for a house elf to kill a wizard, and that magic I felt certainly wasn't mine!* Dobby looked like he was going to be ill.

"Dobby, I-- I want you to be my house elf." She said quickly, weakly pushing Harry's hand away from her face. *I can't believe I'm going to have a house elf.* She needed Dobby to serve her so that she could tell him to keep his silence. If he were a free elf, he would be obligated to tell the entire truth, but if she owned him, she could order him not to speak, and he would be unable to break her orders. If she could testify or talk with someone of authority, she could claim that she did it on accident, like she had done at her custody hearing. Given her injuries, she was sure no one would blame her for trying to defend herself. *Maybe he'll let me free him afterwards.*

"Dobby must bind himself to the Master of a household. The little Miss is not a Master of a household." Dobby gave her a mournful look. "Dobby is a bad elf. The little Miss should not want Dobby."

"You're a very good elf Dobby, you saved us." She said quickly. "What about Harry then? Harry is the head of his household."

"I am?" Harry asked, puzzled.

"Yes, you are," she said, panting for breath. "You are the last of the Potters, and that makes you the head of your household, even if you are underage." *I'm so tired. I just want to rest.*

Dobby looked at Harry in awe. "The little Miss' friend is Harry Potter? Dobby has heard that Harry Potter was a great wizard, but Dobby did not know that Harry Potter is so brave and loyal that he would go to rescue his friend." His large green eyes filled with tears. "Dobby would be honoured to serve Harry Potter."

"What?" Harry asked, clearly puzzled. "I don't understand. Who are you? What are you?"

"I is Dobby, sir, and Dobby is a house - elf sir, and Dobby would very much like to serve Harry Potter." Dobby replied.

“Quick Dobby, bind yourself to Harry, please.” Hermione whispered, fighting to stay awake. She had pushed herself too hard and was far past the point of exhaustion, but she needed to protect Dobby. Nearly two weeks of constant pain and little sleep were catching up with her.

“Does Harry Potter wish to have Dobby as his servant?” The elf asked formally. After a quick glance at Hermione, Harry nodded slowly. Dobby, tears of joy in his eyes, reached out and touched the hem of Harry’s outer robes, covering them both with a soft, mist - like glow. “Dobby serves the great Harry Potter,” the little elf said in admiration as he looked at his new Master. “What can Dobby do for his Master?”

Harry cringed. “Please don’t call me that Dobby; I want us to be friends. But do you know how to get us out of here? Hermione’s hurt, and I want to leave and get her help.”

“Don’t tell anyone,” Hermione interrupted. “Don’t tell anyone anything about what has happened,” she said desperately.

Dobby grabbed hold of his ears and began to pull on them. “Dobby is bound to the commands of his Master and his Master’s family.”

“It’s okay Dobby, Hermione and I are married.” Harry said simply. “And if Hermione says not to tell anyone, than there is a very good reason, so don’t tell anyone, okay?”

Dobby nodded. “Dobby understands. Dobby will obey his Master and his Mistress.” Hermione cringed inwardly. She didn’t like being called a Mistress. It made her sound cruel.

“That’s good Dobby, but Hermione and I really need to leave, since Hermione is hurt and that bad man is dead. Do you know how we--” Harry was cut off when the door banged open.

Narcissa Malfoy stood in the doorway. Taking in the scene in a glance, she hissed angrily and drew her wand as Draco hid behind her robes, crying. “*You!* You nasty little--”

Hermione closed her eyes against whatever spell would be cast when she felt something grab onto her ankle and felt a strange sensation

rush over her. It felt almost as though she were falling. When she opened her eyes again, she was blinded by a bright light overhead.

Distantly, she heard a great deal of commotion, but couldn't bring herself to be concerned. Dobby wouldn't have taken them to a place that wasn't safe. Worn out from her trials, Hermione let herself rest, and for the first time since she had journeyed to the past, Morpheus granted her peaceful dreams.

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A/N: I'm very dissatisfied with this chapter. It just felt...jumpy to me. Did anyone else think it was jumpy? I was trying to make the thoughts erratic, because I thought that a person who's been held prisoner and who's been tortured for nearly two weeks wouldn't be able to think coherently. It just didn't come out right to me. Maybe I'll go back and tweak it when I'm done with the story.

The title, in case anyone is curious or recognizes it, is from my favourite poem, "Invictus" by William Ernest Henley. If you're feeling froggy, read it, it's wonderful.

Oh, and somewhere out there is a person who flamed my story. I would like to ask this individual to please tell me what it is about where I'm taking this story that you don't like. I consider fan fiction practice for writing real novels, so if there is something you don't like about my writing style, I would appreciate it if you would tell me what you would like me to change. I cannot fix or explain parts of my story if the only thing you tell me is you think the way I am taking my story is, well, I prefer not to use profanity if I don't have to, so I won't quote you here. If there is something you would like me to fix, please tell me what it is.

And before anyone comments on Harry's wandless magic, there will be a discussion between Harry and Hermione about it in the next chapter. No, I didn't kill Draco. He's only six, and I'm not going to kill a kid. As for Malfoy Senior, well, he needed to go. I have plans, and all he'd do is cause me problems.

Well, I would like to thank everyone for reading, and give special thanks to those who reviewed. Please read and review!

Cheers,

Madm05

Chapter Ten: Realization

When did the floor become so soft? Hermione wondered as she slowly began to wake. She couldn't recall the floor of her prison being so comfortable. Her whole body ached, jolts of pain sometimes shooting through her body. Though she wanted nothing more than to go back to sleep, she forced her eyes open and screamed in shock.

Hovering over her was a set of sapphire eyes. The face hanging over hers jerked back at her cry, to reveal a head of honey - blonde curls and a sweet face. "Oh my, I'm ever so sorry. We weren't expecting you to wake so soon," the woman said breathlessly with a wide grin. "Now, I'm Matilda Rosen, your mediwitch here at St. Mungo's, but please, call me Matilda. Do you need anything, dear? Water, something to eat, perhaps?"

Hermione was silent for a minute before a small smile crept over her lips as she realized where she was. *Thank you, Dobby.* "How long have I been here?" She rasped, her throat dry.

The mediwitch's smile fell. "Oh, I'm afraid you've been here for nearly seven days, little one." She shook her head sadly. "We don't know what happened to you other than what your little friend has told us, which wasn't much." The woman was talking more to herself now than to Hermione. "Amazing. Even as a little boy, Harry Potter is such a hero. I understand the two of you are betrothed. I must say, you are such a lucky little witch, getting to marry Harry Potter!" The woman said cheerfully.

Hermione cringed. She hated it when people thought of Harry as nothing more than the Boy Who Lived. She looked around her empty room. "Where are they? My family, I mean. Where's Harry and Papa Remus? Where is Sirius and T-- erm, Dora?"

"They should be here soon." Matilda said as she swished her wand over her bedside table, conjuring a glass of water. "It's still quite early yet-- not even eight in the morning. Visiting hours begin at seven you know, and they end at eleven. We have a very strict policy here at St. Mungo's. We like to provide the best care for our patients." Matilda pulled absently on the bed sheet, straightening it. "So never you worry, dear, your little friend will be here soon. He's such a loyal little

thing. I hope he's a Hufflepuff. You may not know it, but that was my old house when I was a young thing in Hogwarts."

Hermione watched in amazement as the woman continued to talk non - stop. *Doesn't she breathe?* She raised her hand to her eyes and realized that it still hurt to move. Perhaps she didn't have her necklace back-- that would explain why she felt horrible. "Excuse me," she said weakly. "I need something for the pain. It hurts."

The woman froze. That was never a good sign. "Well, you see dear--"

"Wotcher, Hermione!" Tonks called out. Hermione noted with amusement that her hair was neon green.

"Hermione!" Remus called out as he walked into the room. "You're awake!" He grinned briefly before he took on a concerned expression. "Are you alright? The mediwizards said that you had been through a lot." He sat down on the edge of the bed as Tonks, with Harmony in her arms, Sirius and Harry came in. Harry, she noted, looked particularly sad. The mediwitch quietly slipped out of the room.

"Guess what, Hermione!" Tonks fairly chirped as she bounced a giggling Harmony in her arms. "Remus was able to get custody over you again. You get to go home with us, Sweet Pea!"

Hermione cringed inwardly at the nickname then felt relief wash over her-- she was terrified that she would end up with yet another Pureblood Elitist family. She smiled weakly and winced in pain. "Can I please have a pain - relief potion? It hurts so much."

"Well," Remus shifted nervously. "The thing is, Hermione, that--"

"My - My!" Harmony shrieked happily, reaching her arms out for Hermione. Tonks held on to the squirming baby, refusing to let Harmony dive out of her arms. Upset, Harmony turned to Tonks, "Doh - Doh!"

"Dodo?" Hermione asked in amusement.

Tonks flushed. "We think it's her way of saying Dora," she murmured. Remus and Sirius snickered. "Well," she scowled, "at least Harmony

doesn't call me Moo - Moo or Pee - Pee!" The two men quieted immediately and suddenly became fascinated with the ceiling.

"Alas," Sirius said dramatically. "Dora is an extinct bird, Moony is a cow, and I, Padfoot, am bodily waste. Oh, how the mighty have fallen."

The group chuckled at his antics, stopping abruptly when Hermione winced from the sharp pain shooting through her body. "Can I *please* have a potion for the pain," she gasped.

Hermione felt a surge of panic when silence fell over the room again. Remus cleared his throat and sat on the edge of her bed. "Well, you see Hermione, we can't give you a potion. It's uh, it's complicated. Mr. Malfoy, the man you were staying with after... ah... you left, he, well, he did things to the food you ate, very bad things."

Hermione felt a sinking feeling in her stomach as Remus began to wring his hands. The werewolf grasped her hand gently in his. "Hermione, Mr. Malfoy gave you what is called a two - part poison." Her stomach knotted. "That means that he mixed something into your food that could hurt you very much, something that could kill you. You don't have to worry, though, not yet. This poison that he gave you will only hurt you if it is mixed with the what triggers it."

Hermione thought about telling him that she already knew what a two - part poison was, but she couldn't bring herself to speak. Remus was still talking, but she wasn't listening. A two - part poison? When did Malfoy intend to give her the other half, the potion that would trigger the first part and kill her? What *could* trigger the first part? From what she had read on the subject, it would either be a potion or a specific ingredient that triggered the poison. Surely there must be some connection between the two - part poison in her system and her not being allowed to have a healing potion.

"So you see," he said, pulling her away from her thoughts. "I can't give you anything for the pain, because the poison in your body is triggered by lacewing flies. Now usually, lacewing flies are used in antidotes because they give a person energy. But the thing is, lacewing flies are used in a lot of healing potions, not just antidotes, and that means that you can't use any of them, or you'll die.

Unfortunately, lacewing flies are used in pain - relief potions, as well as the potion used to soothe people who have been put under the Cruciatus Curse.” Remus concluded sadly.

“Thankfully, no one gave you anything with lacewing flies in it when you first arrived. It’s the policy here for the mediwizards and mediwitches to run a lot of tests over anyone who enters into their care. Unfortunately, you were put under the Cruciatus Curse so many times without being able to properly recovering in between bouts that, well, it will take you a while to recover completely. But you will recover,” he rushed to add.

Her head was whirling. *When will I be able to rest? Can’t just one thing go right?* Every thing seemed to be going wrong. She simply couldn’t believe that she had come so far, done so much, only to have yet another set back. Were the fates not content to know she would never see her parents again? Never use a wand?

And that’s when it struck home. She could die. She was mortal, just like everyone else. It had seemed so surreal. She hadn’t even known she had died before, and it still didn’t seem real to her. Death had been so much like a dream, like a fairy tale, complete with a family reunion and a happy ending. It had always been a distant fact and never a reality. She, Harry and Ron had defied death so many times before that it hadn’t seem real to her. Now she faced her mortality-- one wrong potion, and she would die. She would fail in her mission and either Voldemort would win, or Harry would become the next Dark Lord.

“It will be alright though, because muggles-- people who can’t use magic-- don’t use lacewing flies at all in any of their medicines.” Sirius soothed, pulling her from her thoughts. “Since it was decided that you will be coming home, I took the liberty of buying some muggle medicines. I don’t know what medicines work for what illnesses, so I just bought a little bit of everything. You can tell us which ones work the best for you.”

Hermione nodded slowly, taking in what Sirius said. *Well, she thought wryly, I wanted a way to keep in touch with the muggle world. I guess*

this is one of those cases where I should have been more careful about what I wished for.

Her thoughts were disrupted when the door burst open, revealing none other than Minister Fudge himself. "Ah! Our Wandless Witch and the Boy Who Lived, awake and safe and sound. You are well, I hope?"

Sirius opened his mouth to speak, but Remus spoke before he could reply. "About as well as two children who were very nearly killed can be, I suppose. But then, as Harry hasn't spoken a word to anyone since he told the healers here at St. Mungo's that Mr. Malfoy was dead and that Hermione was hurt, and Hermione herself has only just awoken from just shy of two weeks of torture, we really wouldn't be able to say."

Hermione's head snapped towards Harry, ignoring the pain caused by the sudden movement. He looked paler than normal, and his face had a haunted look to it. It didn't seem like he had been sleeping very well, either. *Harry hasn't spoken? Oh dear, Malfoy's death must have had a terrible impact on him.*

Fudge laughed nervously. "Well, I'm sure it's nothing they can't bounce back from. They're resilient little things."

"They are children," Sirius scowled. "They have been through a traumatizing experience and need to be left alone so that they may have time to recover from their ordeal." His lips quirked into a smirk. "I suggest you leave before you get into even more trouble than you already are."

The Minister began to sputter. "Now see here," he snapped. "I am the Minister of Magic, and I--"

"You won't be for long though." Sirius said coolly. "I'll see to that."

Fudge turned red and glared. "Is that a threat?"

Sirius smiled, his eyes glinting with mischief. "At the risk of sounding cliché, no, it's a promise." He turned his back on the Minister and sat down, leaning back nonchalantly.

Trying and failing to hide a smile, Tonks pulled a piece of parchment from one of her many pockets and handed it to her cousin. Giving Hermione a wink, the former auror in training handed Harmony a rattle when the baby began to fuss in her arms.

"Do you know what this is?" Sirius asked, waving the parchment in the air. "It's a transcript. Not just any transcript of course, this is a transcript of the trial of Peter Pettigrew and the custodial hearing of Hermione, Harmony, and their dog Horace.

"There is a lot here, so I'll just read you the interesting part. Ah, here it is. *'Remus Lupin then approached Harmony Granger, stating "You should try to stay on Harmony's good side because she had good aim. If she likes you, she pulls your hair."* Following his remark, the child then pulled his hair while giggling. Lucius Malfoy then raised his cane and attempted to strike either Remus Lupin or Harmony Granger-- his target has not been determined-- but was repelled by Hermione Granger's wandless magic.' Isn't that interesting Minister?" Sirius asked, folding the parchment in half and tucking it in his robes.

His eyes bore into the Minister's. "You were presiding over the hearing, Minister." Sirius said, his voice deceptively soft. "You put Hermione in the care of the Malfoys knowing that Mr. Malfoy tried to hit someone in front of the *entire* Wizengamot out of anger. That is wilful child endangerment." His eyes narrowed as the Minister began to shift uncomfortably. "I'll have your office for this, mark my words." He smiled grimly. "Yes, that's a promise, not a threat."

Fudge paled dramatically before clearing his throat. "Well," he shifted nervously. "I've come to check up on--"

"Uck!" Harmony shouted, throwing her rattle at the Minister's head, hitting him in the middle of his forehead.

"That means she doesn't like you," Remus said casually. Harmony began to chew on Tonks' hair, making happy noises. "She likes Dora, though."

Sirius grinned rakishly. "Not to mention, I know for a fact that at least fourteen members of the Wizengamot have accepted bribes, and I

have no qualms with confessing to being the one bribing them if it gets them removed from their positions.”

“Ha!” Fudge shouted with glee. “I’ll have to report you, Mr. Black. You’re going to be punished for this--”

“What are you going to do, throw me in Azkaban?” Sirius snorted. “You know as well as I that in the wizarding court, considering that I willingly came forward this morning before coming to visit Hermione, I’ll be fined and nothing more. Even then, the most I can be fined is a thousand galleons for each person I bribed.” Sirius smirked. “Fourteen thousand galleons is pocket change to me, Minister.” He somehow turned the title into an insult.

“Now if you would,” Remus interjected coldly, “we have two very young and likely traumatized children trying to recover. It would be appreciated if you would leave.”

“Now see here, you filthy beast, I am the Minister of--”

“Not for long,” Sirius snarled, leaping to his feet. “Remus may lack the resources to get you out of office, but rest assured, you will not be in office much longer after what you’ve done. Once the public learns of your careless dealings with Hermione-- and make no mistake, the wizarding world will learn all about them-- you’ll be removed from office faster than you can say ‘Wizengamot.’ I *strongly* suggest you leave. You may even want to resign to save face.”

Fudge sputtered indignantly before he calmed himself enough to speak. “I have come to personally inform you that the two children will need to bear witness at the trial of Narcissa Malfoy. Before that, however, they will be required to tell aurors,” he glanced maliciously at Tonks, “what happened to them at Malfoy Manor. The aurors who will be questioning them will be here within a few minutes. Until then, I will remain here to be sure you do not coach the children in any way.”

Hermione found it difficult to breathe. Now they wanted to make the Malfoy family pay for their crimes? Why couldn’t they just sweep it under the rug, like every other time the Malfoys chose to break the

law? *I don't want to talk to them about what happened*, she thought vehemently. *I want to forget it!*

A few moments later, a pair of aurors walked in and Hermione immediately recognized Alastor Moody. *He must not have retired yet.* She had no idea who the other man was. She found herself contemplating Moody. He didn't seem quite as scary or as crazy as he was in the future. "Well," the Minister said, alternating between glaring at Sirius and Remus. "I'll take my leave of you."

"It's about time," Remus muttered. "Sirius, are you sure you don't want to run for Minister?"

"I'll pass," Sirius said waving his hand dismissively. "While the idea of being a legal con artist appeals to me, politics isn't very interesting to me, especially since it means I have to actually listen to what those bags of hot air have to say."

"Hello, Mad - Eye. I trust you're well." Remus said.

The gruff man nodded sharply. "Black, Lupin, Tonks, Potter," Moody said harshly, nodding to Harry before he turned to Sirius. "He still not talking?" Sirius shook his head grimly. "Happens," Moody nodded. "Sometimes kids see some awful stuff and refuse to talk." He turned to Hermione. "What about you, are you going to tell us what happened?"

Swallowing, Hermione nodded. Moody flicked his wand around them. "I'm auror Moody and this is my partner, auror Doyle. I just cast a privacy charm, so Harry Potter can't hear your story and copy it. Your statement is more important though, young lady, and if I think your lying, I'll give a potion to make you tell the truth, got that? Now, tell me what happened." Moody held up his wand, the tip pulsing with a red light, telling her that the conversation was being recorded.

Taking a deep breath, Hermione told the aurors the basics of what happened. She wasn't in the mood to tell them everything, and she was hoping they would let her leave the more painful aspects out--especially Narcissa Malfoy's remarks about her parents.

She explained how Mr. Malfoy had taken her necklace, leaving her unable to move from the intense tingling of magic and how Dobby had been sent to feed and clean her. Hermione explained that Lucius had questioned her extensively in regards to her ability to use wandless magic, as that is what she assumed he meant when he demanded that she tell him her secrets. She told them how she had been questioned using varying torture methods, from the breaking of her fingers to the use of the Cruciatus Curse, carefully to avoid telling them too much detail. She told them how she had been a tool used to teach Draco Malfoy the Dark Arts. Then she told them how she had killed Mr. Malfoy accidentally.

"I was so afraid he was going to kill me and Harry," she said quietly as she looked down and tugged at her bed sheets to hide her eyes from Moody. "I just wanted him to stop, and my magic reacted and knocked him away from me and Harry and he fell on the spear." Hermione concluded, still looking down, noting distantly that she actually was wearing her necklace, she just hadn't been able to tell earlier. Though she was sure her Occlumency was working perfectly, she didn't want to risk that they would see the lie in her eyes. Best to make them think she was ashamed or afraid.

"Alright then," Moody said, looking deep in thought. "Considering my years as an auror, I'm going to guess that you didn't tell me everything. You gave us a good description of what happened after your friend arrived, but haven't told us much about what happened while you were in Malfoy Manor. You're a scared little girl, I understand that, but you need to tell us everything that happened, or I'll be forced to give you that stuff that makes you tell the truth." His magical eyes whirled around in his head and focused on her.

Hermione knew he was lying. She doubted very much that he would have come here without knowing about the two - part poison, and she was sure that he knew lacewing flies were part of Veritaserum. Sadly, as a six year old little girl, she wasn't supposed to know that, so she had to tell him more.

Drawing in another deep breath, she told the two aurors about the treatment she received from Narcissa Malfoy. She had to stop to prevent herself from breaking down into tears on several occasions

while she spoke. *I'm not going to cry, not for them. If I cry for them, that means they won. I won't cry.*

She told them of her strange conversation with Draco and her confusion as to why he would want her to smile for him. She described the spells the older Malfoy had taught Draco to cast on her, then Hermione told the two aurors how Draco had used her for target practice with some of the spells he had been taught.

Then she told them more of her trials with Lucius. Hermione gave them more detail as she described her torture sessions with Mr. Malfoy. Sometimes she would have to stop to clam herself. *These are my secrets*, she thought. *I shouldn't have to tell them, I should be allowed to keep my secrets, but if I don't...* She forced herself to tell them everything that she could safely tell them, no matter how much it hurt to think of what had happened. She was only thankful that Lucius Malfoy did not care for little girls as anything other than a target to throw hexes at. Hermione even bashfully admitted to have goaded the Malfoys by comparing them to muggles.

Time seemed to drag by, and they questioned her on the finer points of her story relentlessly, but soon she was done, and Moody was satisfied. He took a drink from the flask on his hip before looking at his partner. "Pensieve?" He asked.

The other man nodded. "Definitely." Doyle waved his wand and stood up, turning to the others. "We've finished questioning Hermione Granger and have decided for her sake and for the sake of simplicity, that a pensieve should be used for her statement at the trial. After hearing what she had to say, we think it best that we simply view her memories rather than have her repeat what happened. Then we won't have to worry about her exaggerating and we probably won't even need the boy's statement. Her memories should be more than enough."

Hermione felt herself relax. If she could put her memories into a pensieve, it would be that much easier to convince them that she killed Malfoy in self defence and Dobby would be safe. Part of her was angry that she hadn't been allowed to use a pensieve for her statement at her custody hearing.

It was just a shame that she couldn't get her hands on that journal. With Malfoy dead, there was no one to give it to Ginny in the future. She would simply have to find another way to get hold of it.

"Right," Moody said gruffly, his eye whizzing around and looking at everything. "We better be off, eh Doyle? We need to make a transcript to submit as evidence and prepare other evidence." He began to grumble. "You'd think that with my experience I'd be out at Malfoy Manor, looking for Dark Artefacts, but no, I'm here questioning kids." He looked back at Doyle. "Let's go."

"Actually, Alastor," Remus said stepping forward. "Sirius, Dora and I have some questions we would like to ask you about wards. As I'm sure you know, we've decided to set up a school for kids who can't quite afford to have a proper education. We would like your advice on what wards to put on the house and anything else you can tell us about."

"You're really going to do it, eh?" Moody asked.

Sirius grinned at him. "We sure are. I'm nearly finished with the paperwork, I'm close to having a full staff, and I've gotten several letters from families wanting to send their kids to our school. There will be quite the variety of kids there-- we're expecting the five youngest Weasleys and Frank and Alice's boy, to name a few. We'd like to be sure that the kids are secure. That and I've heard the Weasley twins are quite the jokers. I thought you might give us some pointers on damage control."

Moody scratched his chin. "I suppose I could give you a few pointers on the matter. You can never be too careful, even in peaceful times. Constant Vigilance, that's my motto." The auror nodded his head, his magical eye glaring at Harmony. "The baby can't be there. You never know what charm has been placed on a baby. Just because they look all cute and innocent doesn't mean they are."

Maybe he's not as sane as I thought he was, Hermione thought. "You can leave Harmony with me and Harry," the young witch said. "I don't mind." Tonks shared a quick look with Sirius and Remus before she agreed and set Harmony on the bed. Hermione smiled at her sister.

"Hey there, little one, did you miss me?" Harmony began to babble happily as the adults filed out of the room to discuss wards.

Hermione looked over at Harry, who was staring out the window. He hadn't moved since he came in. "Harry," she called softly. "Harry, will you come over here? Please?" Harry looked up then slowly trudged over to her bed and sat on the edge. She could tell he was going to make this difficult.

"Harry," she said softly, "will you please tell me what's wrong? The grownups said you won't talk, Harry, and that scares me. Will you tell me what's wrong?" Harry pursed his lips and shrugged. Hermione sighed. "Please Harry, please tell me what's wrong," she whispered, setting her hand gently on his shoulder. "I want to help you. What's wrong?"

Harry was quiet for a moment. "Everything," he said in a broken voice. Hermione didn't know whether to be relieved that Harry had spoken or frightened that he thought everything was wrong. Deciding that it would be best to let him talk on his own, she began to rub his back in soothing circles.

Tears were forming in his wide emerald eyes. "I'm afraid," he said, not looking at her. "I was talking with Dobby and he told me that we aren't really married and that's why he can't obey you, and I'm afraid that now that we're not married anymore, that you'll realize I'm a freak and leave me like Dudley said you would."

"Oh Harry," she soothed. "Never, I'd never leave you." She pulled him into a tight embrace. "You're the first friend I've ever had," *in this timeline and in the other*. "You're my best friend Harry, and I'll never leave you." She pulled back and looked into his eyes. "And I'd better not hear you calling yourself a freak ever again, do you hear me? We're a lot alike, you and I," *we both have the weight of the world on our shoulders in some way*. "And if you call yourself a freak, then your calling me one as well." Harry seemed slightly aghast at the thought.

"Do you promise? Do you promise to always be my friend?" He sniffled. "You're the only friend I have, Hermione, and I don't want to lose you."

Hermione smiled softly at him. "Yes, Harry, I promise you that I will always be your friend. And you know, you may have more friends if you tried talking to more people. Do you remember that boy Neville? I'm sure he would like to be your friend, if you'd let him." *And I'm sure being your friend at such a young age will do wonders for his confidence.*

Harry nodded and sighed heavily. "You're going to hate me when I tell you what I did. Then you're not going to be my friend anymore." He said quietly, his soft voice breaking as his lip quivered.

Hermione felt her stomach tighten. "I told you I would always be your friend Harry. There is nothing that you could have said or have done that would make me hate you."

The young boy swallowed thickly and looked unseeingly at the far wall. "I did it." Harry said, his voice hoarse.

"What did you do?" She asked, her stomach twisting in knots. Harmony, sensing Harry's distress began to whimper.

"I--" he choked on the word then forced himself to continue. "I did it. I k-killed him, I k-killed the man who kept hurting you." He was gasping for air as tears streamed down his face. Time seemed to stop as Hermione paled dramatically. "But you were hurt, and I wanted to protect you, and I wanted to make sure that he never hurt you again." He was sobbing now.

"B-but the noise," Hermione said weakly. "House - elf magic makes noises."

"D-Dobby th-threw up a shield around us to p-protect us," he sniffled. "But I didn't know, I swear I didn't know," he was shaking as he cried. "I'm a killer, a bad boy, a freak, and I'll--"

"No," Hermione interrupted and pulled him into a hug. "No, you're not a killer Harry, you're not a bad boy or a freak." She cupped his face gently in her hands and made him look her in the eyes. "You're a hero, Harry," she whispered softly to him. "I would probably be dead by now if you hadn't come for me. I'd bet my necklace he would have given me a potion with lacewing flies if he thought someone was

coming to take me away, and then I would be dead.” He didn’t look convinced. “You saved me, Harry. He was a bad man, Harry, a very bad man. *He* was a killer, not you. He would have killed me if you hadn’t stopped him.”

“But I’m going to get into trouble for killing him and I’ll be locked in a cupboard without meals for weeks!” He sobbed.

Hermione mentally cursed whatever powers may be for forcing this life on him. A six - year - old boy shouldn’t have to deal with things like this. “No Harry, you won’t. I told them that I killed Mr. Malfoy.” His head snapped up as he looked at her. She had to take the blame now, because she had already told the aurors that she killed Malfoy. “I told them I killed him in self defence, Harry, and they said it was alright. You’re not going to get into trouble Harry, because no one will know.” She looked into his emerald eyes. “I’ll take care of it, Harry, I promise.”

Hermione decided not to lie to him or to make it seem trivial. To a six year old boy, killing someone was not trivial. She wouldn’t tell him it was a job well done, she wouldn’t try to tell him everything was going to be alright, because she knew this would always haunt him. There was no spell to take away the pain, no matter how much she might wish there was. There were no magic words that would make everything wonderful. So Hermione did the only thing she could do to help him.

Holding Harry close, she wept with him. For the first time since Remus had found her crying in the broom closet at the Ministry, Hermione allowed herself to cry. She opened her arms and grabbed Harmony when her sister began to cry as well. Harry loosened his grip on Hermione to wrap an arm around Harmony until the three children were tangled together, crying.

Harmony cried because her sister and Harry were crying. She didn’t like it when they cried, because she loved them very much. She wanted them to stop crying.

Harry cried because he was tired of being a bad boy, of doing bad things. It seemed he was always doing something wrong, like the time he had finished weeding the garden and accidentally tracked

mud all over Aunt Petunia's kitchen. He didn't want Sirius or Remus to find out that he was a bad boy and had killed someone, or they might lock him in a cupboard under the stairs. He had never been so afraid of himself-- what if his magic hurt Hermione?

Hermione cried because it was always going to be Harry. Always. She could try as much as she wanted, she could collect Horcruxes until she had them all, she could try to find a spell to vanquish Voldemort once, and it wouldn't matter. It was always going to be Harry. In the end, Harry would face Voldemort, not her. Now he felt he was a killer. Children, she knew, have a different kind of logic than adults, so there was no way of appealing to the common sense of a little boy. It hurt to know she had not been able to do more to keep him happy.

When she accepted the task of saving Harry's soul, she knew there would be hardships. She had never thought that she would wind up an orphan, living Sirius and Remus, betrothed to Harry or be held prisoner by the Malfoys, but she knew there would be hardships. She didn't know that her most difficult challenge would be standing by while Harry dealt with demons he was too young to face. It hurt that she couldn't help. Hermione could only hold her sister and Harry closer, trying to comfort them as much as she could.

In the hallway, Sirius, Remus and Tonks watched the scene with heavy hearts. They hadn't been able to hear what had been said between them, but it was painful to watch the three children cry. "Bad things come in threes," Remus murmured. "Hermione's parents died, then she found out she can no longer use a wand, then she was taken to the Malfoys, and now she's been poisoned because of it."

"That's four," Tonks said with a heavy sigh.

Remus shook his head. "Malfoy poisoned her while she was with him. It only counts as one."

"Harry lost his parents, had to live with the Dursleys, then whatever happened at Malfoy Manor... Harry is up to three as well. Let's hope the fates realize they've had more than their fair share of tragedy." Sirius added solemnly.

“I don’t know. Sometimes it seems like some people are just destined to have bad things happen to them.” Tonks said, crossing her arms over her chest. She glanced at her companions. “Look on the bright side. At least they didn’t have to battle with a basilisk or something like that at Malfoy Manor.”

The two men hummed their agreement and watched as the children continued to sniffle until they fell asleep.

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A/N: I’m sorry this took so long, but I’ve been rather busy of late. Things are going to be hectic for a while so it may take even longer between updates. I’m sorry for the delay. I’ll try to post as quickly as I can, but I can’t make any promises.

Well, now the darkest part of the story is over. Yes, I’m done being cruel to Hermione. Mostly. To explain the poison, I realized that Malfoy wouldn’t let her get away easily, and that he was probably doing something to her food, so it is quite logical. Further, as Hermione sort of realized, she had always felt sort of immortal since she had escaped death so many times. This was my way of reminding her of her mortality.

Well, thank you for reading and special thanks to those who reviewed last time. I had a tough time with Harry and Hermione’s conversation at the end, so tell me how it turned out. It’s the most emotional scene I’ve written so far, and I’m curious to see what you think. Thanks again, and please review.

Cheers,

Madm05

Chapter Eleven: Trials

Three days had passed, and Hermione found herself watching the trial of Narcissa Malfoy as the key witness. To her left sat Remus, still weary from his transformation two nights before. Tonks was on the other side of Remus, Harmony giggling in her lap. Harry sat on Hermione's right, his face stoic. Lately he had been soft spoken, when he spoke at all. He talked to Hermione the most, but he was getting better.

Mediwitch Matilda Rosen was the first to be called forward to testify the extent of her injuries when she had turned up at the hospital. "Luckily she will have almost a complete recovery. The effects of the Cruciatus curse should wear off completely within the week. The two-part poison in her system is the *Aeternus Veneficus*. That poison lasts longer than any other two-part poison in our world." She shook her head sadly. "It will be in her system for the next forty-seven years. There's no cure.

"And then, the child had her fingers broken so many times, it's entirely possible that they may cause her pain every so often. It happens, sometimes. It shouldn't cause her any problems, but every so often it will act up, much like an old war wound."

Dobby was even called forward to testify about his role in the whole ordeal, and professes to raising a shield to protect the children from his former master. Hermione did note that Dobby was treated a distinct lack of courtesy afforded to everyone else.

"Dobby had to take care of Little Miss because she couldn't do it herself, and Little Miss was very kind to Dobby. Little Miss was very brave. When Dobby asked Little Miss why she never cried, Little Miss told Dobby she would not do what Dobby's old family wanted her to do."

"Explain, elf. What did she mean when she said she wouldn't do what the Malfoy family wanted her to do." Bartemius Crouch Senior, the new Minister of Magic, demanded.

"Dobby's old family tried to teach the Little Miss lessons. They wanted Little Miss to call them Master or Mistress, but Little Miss wouldn't do

it, and they wanted Little Miss to tell them things, because they knew Little Miss was powerful. Little Miss wouldn't tell them though, no she wouldn't. Dobby asked Little Miss why she didn't do what Dobby's old family wanted her to do, and Little Miss said that she couldn't, because then they would do bad things with what she told them, and they would win if she did what she was told."

After questioning Dobby for a little while longer, Hermione was called forward to testify. *Best for last*, she thought bitterly. Squeezing Harry's hand, she stood up. Hermione walked slowly to the centre of the room, much as she had all those weeks before. The difference was that the first time she was stepping forward to tell how she had discovered Pettigrew. This time she was going to have her memories put into a pensieve to be viewed by the Wizengamot. Still weak from her time at the Malfoy residence, the walk felt even more excruciating slow than the first time.

The man who was going to take her memories was a stern looking man, with a crooked nose, deep brown eyes and black hair. "As you are underage and cannot use a wand, you are to think of the memories to be shown in the hearing of Narcissa Malfoy," he said stiffly.

It would be a long, laborious process as the pensieve was old and could only hold and project one memory at a time. Hermione swallowed thickly and closed her eyes, concentrating on the first memory to be shown. The first memory she brought up when Lucius first took her. A spell was cast over the pensieve then an image was projected into the centre of the room. The image itself was a little larger than her actual self, though it was slightly translucent. The Wizengamot watched the scene play out raptly.

The process continued with all of the other memories to be viewed by the whole of the Wizengamot. It was like a muggle audience in a theatre. They laughed at her witty remarks, they gasped at Narcissa Malfoy's cutting remarks, they cringed as the bones in her fingers were shattered, they were appalled that Draco was being trained in the Dark Arts...and some looked on approvingly, regretting only that Hermione had lived.

Hermione had elected to show a mixture of her memories. She was careful not to show the most devastating of her encounter with the Malfoys, but was sure to include enough evidence of Narcissa's role to prove her guilt. She had spent some time deciding whether or not to show her own remarks towards the Malfoy family, but decided that she would rather tell everyone than let Narcissa use her silence as a way to discredit her.

Hermione decided that it was just as awful to watch what happened to her as it was to live it. When Mr. Malfoy had been breaking her bones she had been too concerned with the pain to hear the sickening crunch of her bones breaking. Even as she watched, she could feel a phantom ache in her hands.

The worst thing about the whole ordeal was the pitying looks the others sent her way. Some of the witches in the room looked horrified and looked like they were ready to coo over her as they patted her gently on the head. Dumbledore had a sad, faraway look in his eyes. Remus, Sirius and Tonks looked like they were going to be ill. Harry watched stoically, a hint of fury glittering in his emerald eyes.

When asked, Hermione said that she had killed Mr. Malfoy in defence of herself and her friend, Harry Potter. Hours seemed to drag on before her task was finished and she was permitted to return to her seat. Now it was Narcissa's turn to defend herself. The woman walked to the centre of the room, her eyes trailing lazily over the Wizengamot members.

"Narcissa Malfoy, how do you plead, in the face of the evidence against you?" The Minister asked stiffly.

Narcissa smiled serenely. "I did all that and more," she purred. "It would seem that filthy little Mudblood didn't want you to know everything, probably because it was true. Of course, if I had hidden myself away in a room while my parents were fighting for their lives, I daresay I'd be ashamed as well."

Hermione flinched as if she had been hit while people began to whisper around her. Remus put his arm about her shoulders as Crouch pounded on the podium in front of him to restore order. "Silence! Madam, you will hold your tongue!"

"Is there a problem, Minister?" Narcissa asked with a sickly sweet smile. "I thought you were seeking the truth. The truth is that your precious little Wandless Witch didn't tell you half of the things that happened. I would know, I was there. She didn't tell you that Lucius once ripped off her fingernails." Several people, witches and wizards alike, drew back, horrified. "She probably didn't want you to know because she screamed as he tore them off. I have to say, she's a resilient little thing--"

"Silence!" Crouch yelled.

--I mean, she never cried, not even when Lucius broke her legs." Her smile was a full - blown grin.

"Silence, woman!" Crouch was livid, the audience was rapt, Remus, Sirius, Tonks and Harry were aghast. Hermione was shaking in her seat, staring intently at her feet to avoid everyone's eyes. *They weren't supposed to know!*

"I tried a different approach, of course. I tried to explain to the foolish child that her parents were nothing more than filthy muggles, not even fit clean up after house - elves and deserved to die." She continued nonchalantly. "I don't blame her for not bringing it up in her little walk down memory lane. I wouldn't want to bring up a reminder of my lineage if it was as disgraceful as hers either."

"What is she doing?" Tonks hissed to Sirius.

Her cousin sighed. "She knew she lost the case even before it began, so she's going out with a bang. It's a bonus that she gets to hurt Hermione in the process."

"And then--" Narcissa was cut off.

"Life in Azkaban for the high crime of being in possession of Dark Artefacts, and aiding in the deliberate torture of a child!" Crouch shouted, banging a gavel with an air of finality. "In light of recent events, past cases brought against the Malfoy family will be reopened for investigation."

“And my son’s fate?” Narcissa demanded. “What will become of Draco? He’s a child, surely you will not punish a young boy for doing what his parents ask of him?”

“There are a few possibilities concerning your son’s fate,” Crouch said slowly. “He may be placed in the care of his aunt, your sister, Andromeda Tonks nee Black. He may be placed in the care of your cousin and head of the Black household, Sirius Black. He may even be placed in the care of another wizarding family.”

“I recommend placing him with the Parkinsons,” Narcissa said firmly. “Before all of this, Lucius was negotiating a contract between their daughter, Pansy, and my son.”

“And I recommend something entirely different.” Sirius stood and walked towards the Minister. “I propose that we send him to a place where he can recover completely from his exposure to the Dark Arts. I’m not saying that I believe the Parkinson family is practicing the Dark Arts,” Sirius said in a tone that clearly said he did believe just that. “But you must admit, there have been Dark Witches and Wizards from the Parkinson family, and it is entirely possible that there is a Dark Artefact somewhere in their manor, whether they know it or not.”

Sirius trailed his eyes over the members of the Wizengamot, ignoring Narcissa’s glare. “I suggest that young Draco be sent to a family that will teach him what he really needs to learn. That begs the question, what does he need to learn? Well, he needs to learn humility. He needs to learn to respect his fellow witches and wizards, whether they are Purebloods or Muggleborns. He needs to learn to live without the privileges he has been granted all of his life.” He looked Narcissa squarely in the eye. “I say we give him to the Weasley family.”

“I’ll not have my son living with such lowly beings!” Narcissa snapped, her expression appalled. The Wizengamot was murmuring amongst themselves, some agreeing with Sirius, others agreeing with Narcissa.

“You see? This is what the boy lived with! My little cousin needs to unlearn everything his parents have taught him, and relearn how to be an upstanding citizen and member of the wizarding community.

The Weasleys, whom I've already spoken to, are upstanding citizens who have never been involved in the Dark Arts." Sirius said, turning his gaze to Minister Crouch.

"Why don't you take the boy in, Mr. Black?" Someone asked.

"I would," Sirius replied, "If it were not for a few problems. Harry Potter is my godson and lives with me. Remus Lupin also lives with me. He is the guardian of Hermione and Harmony Granger. Harry witness the death of Lucius, Hermione was the one who killed him in defending both her life and Harry's. I don't think it would be wise for them to live in the same household."

There was a murmur of agreement amongst the masses. They began to talk among themselves, deciding Draco Malfoy's fate. Should he be sent to the Weasleys? The Tonks'? The Parkinsons?

Sirius returned to his seat between Remus and Tonks. "How did I do?" He asked, looking between his best friend and his favourite cousin.

"I think you did good, mate." Remus said. "Molly thinks it is a wonderful opportunity to try and rehabilitate him. Of course, Molly thinks that if you hug a child enough, they will grow up to become a wonderful person."

"Are you sure giving him to the Weasleys is a good idea?" Tonks asked.

"It was either that, or give him to the Longbottom family, and I don't think that the young one, what's his name, Neville? Yes, I don't think he would be able to survive young Draco. The Weasleys were the best choice." Sirius said, watching the officials converse.

At last they stood, ready to announce their final decision. "The members of the Wizengamot have decided that Draco Malfoy, aged six, shall be placed in the care of the Weasley family." The room broke out into whispers. "Furthermore!" Crouch shouted to quiet the room. "It has also been decided that one percent of entire Malfoy wealth will be given to the Weasley family to be used for caring for the child in question."

Hermione's eyes widened. That was an enormous amount of money. Hermione was well aware that the Malfoys had several million galleons, so even a mere one percent would be more than Mr. Weasleys total salary over the course of a decade. The Weasleys, she knew, would take their responsibilities very seriously and spend the money only one Draco. Their pride would not allow them to do anything else.

Narcissa Malfoy gasped at hearing the Malfoy wealth would be given to a family she deemed to be so far beneath her. She looked ready to speak but Crouch continued on. "Additionally, as compensation for the acts performed against Hermione Granger, the members of the Wizengamot grant her the right to take possession of anything she so desires in Malfoy Manor, so long as it is not a Dark Artefact, in accordance to the *Iniuriosus Act of 1102*."

"It has also been decided that, due to recent evidence of bribery," he nodded to Sirius, "there will be a full scale investigation of all actions made by members of the Wizengamot within the last two years. All parties determined to have been wronged by corrupt members will be given full compensation." He banged the gavel once more. "This hearing is adjourned."

Hermione breathed a sigh of relief that the trial was over with. Judging from the looks Sirius, Remus and Tonks were sharing, however, she knew that the case was not closed. *Looks like I'll be having a chat with one of them later*, she thought resignedly.

"Come on, we need to go. Do you think we could floo home? Three adults, three kids-- we could do it, right?" Sirius asked, looking at the fireplace a few feet away.

"That should work," Remus said, lifting Hermione into his arms. Hermione rested her chin on his shoulder, exhausted. Behind him, she spotted Mr. Weasley signing several papers, a slightly shocked look on his face. Mrs. Weasley was hugging a disgusted looking Draco.

"Right then," Sirius began, "I'll go first." He lifted Harry into his arms, tossed a pinch of floo powder into the fireplace, and stepped in

shouting "Number twelve, Grimmauld Place!" Tonks followed, Harmony in her arms.

"Our turn," Remus murmured quietly. He shifted her so that she sat more comfortably in his arms, tossed in a pinch of floo powder and shouted "Number twelve, Grimmauld Place!" just like Sirius and Tonks before him.

A dizzying moment later, Hermione was in the kitchen, Tonks, Remus and Sirius sharing a nod. "Right, well, I'm going to take Harry here out for a few lessons on his new broom." Sirius said, gesturing to the Cleansweep Five in the corner. He turned to Harry. "It's a training broom, you see. We bought several of them for the kids that will be coming here for schooling. We'll get you one of your very own when you're older."

"Great idea," Tonks said, her eyes shifting between Remus and Sirius. "I'll go with you. I'm sure Harmony here wouldn't mind some fresh air."

"We can make a day of it," Remus said. "Why don't you all go on out while Hermione and I make some sandwiches. I'm rather hungry." The others filed out as Sirius explained the technicalities of riding a broom to Harry. Soon only Hermione and Remus remained.

The werewolf walked over to the table and pushed one of the chairs out with his foot and set her down before seating himself beside her. "Hermione," he began haltingly. "I know that you don't want to talk about what happened at the Malfoys. I understand that, and I respect that you don't want to talk about it." He leaned forward and put a comforting hand on her shoulder. "But I want you to know that if you ever do want to talk about it, or what happened when your parents..." He trailed off. "If there is every *anything*, anything at all, that you want to talk about, I want you to know that I'll listen."

He tilted his head to the side, studying her intently as she remained silent. "I want you to talk, Hermione, it's not good to keep quiet about this sort of thing. If you don't talk to someone about it, it won't get any better. But," he looked into her eyes, "I won't force you to tell me anything if you don't want to. And if you don't want to talk to me," he gestured to the window, where she could see Sirius showing Harry

how to sit on his broom. "Sirius and even Dora would be willing to listen to you."

He leaned back, still watching her. "Maybe we need to get you a journal or something, so that you can at least write about anything that's bothering you. Would you like that? A journal?"

I'd like Riddle's journal, she thought. Pushing her thoughts aside, she smiled. "Thank you Papa Remus. I would like that very much and... thank you. For everything," Hermione replied quietly. She had almost forgotten how sweet he was. He had said something very similar when her parents had died in the first timeline. It was very comforting. It seemed the people in this timeline were so different from her own, that she forgot they were the same people, only younger.

He hesitated a moment. "Hermione, I know there are many things that you keep secret, and I respect that, but I thought it might be easier for you if I tell you that Sirius and I figured out one of them." Hermione panicked. What had he figured out? "It wasn't hard to guess, when we put everything together. The way you seemed to know things about us, the way you knew how the stories Sirius and I were telling were going to end."

Her stomach knotted. She was a fool! How could she have been so obvious? Of course they would have figured out she was from the future, the way she kept doing things she shouldn't have been able to do. What was she going to do now? She lowered her head. She needed to think.

"Now Hermione, don't be ashamed. There is nothing wrong with being a Seer." Her head snapped up. Remus smiled gently. "See? There is even a teacher who can help control and understand your ability at Hogwarts. It's alright. Now, I know you're probably thinking that it just makes you different from everyone else, but it doesn't, it just makes you special, okay?" Hermione nodded weakly as she cringed inwardly. She really did not want to have to deal with Trelawny.

Remus smiled. "Alright then. We'll get you a journal when we get the chance. It should help you a lot, because you'll be able to write your visions in it as well, and I promise we won't sneak into it and read it.

For now, though, we should get started on some sandwiches.” With that, the pair set to work making ham and cheese, and turkey sandwiches. Just as they were preparing to head outside, there was a knock at the door. “Stay here, Hermione.” Remus frowned as he went to see who was there.

A minute later, Remus returned, accompanied by a Ministry official. “Miss Granger,” he said in a nasally tone. “My name is Donovan Sinclair, I am a representative of the Ministry. I have been sent here to speak to you in regards to the *Iniuriosus Act of 1102*. This act was created for the purpose of compensating youths who have been severely wronged by those who are caring for them. It allows to take anything you want from the Malfoy family in recompense for their crimes against you. I am to serve as your escort in Malfoy Manor so that you may choose what you wish to take possession of.”

Hermione’s mind began to whirl with possibilities. It would be difficult, and there was every chance that she would fail, but if she could succeed... “Books,” she said suddenly. “I would like books. Books of any sort.”

The man looked at her strangely but shrugged it off. “Very well. I will inform the house - elves to set any and all books in Malfoy Manor in the library. Tomorrow morning at precisely half past ten, I will escort yourself and your guardian to Malfoy Manor to sort through the books you would like. Be warned, you will not be permitted to keep anything pertaining to the Dark Arts.” He turned to Remus. “I will show myself out.” The man turned sharply and left the room. A moment later, the door slammed, signalling his exit.

Remus snorted as he picked up three sandwiches and a jar of baby food. “Hermione, you are the only one I know who would want books as payment for everything you suffered through. Wait until Sirius hears this.”

Hermione grinned as she picked up the two remaining sandwiches and followed Remus outside. It was a beautiful day out, and it would be nice to sit back and watch Harry fly around on his broom. Tonks had already spread out a picnic blanket for them, so Hermione sat down and waited for Harry and Sirius to come and eat.

"He's a natural!" Sirius beamed, clapping his hand on Harry's shoulder as they walked over. "Did you see his moves? I bet he's a chaser."

"Seeker," Hermione replied absently, sitting on her chosen corner of the blanket. She flushed when she realized what she had said. "I mean, I think Harry would be a better--"

"Hermione," Remus soothed, "I told you, we know." He looked over at Sirius and Tonks. "I told her that we know about her gift." The others nodded and sat down.

"What gift?" Harry asked, his expression confused.

"Well Harry," Sirius explained. "Hermione has a very rare ability. She can see things that will happen in the future. Now, she can't really control it, so it's kind of scary, and she can't really talk about it, because if she does, then some of the things she sees won't happen, okay?" Harry nodded slowly.

"You're never going to guess what happened, Padfoot." Remus changed the topic. "A Ministry official came over to tell us that he is to escort Hermione and I to Malfoy Manor so that she can choose what she wants to take, and do you know what she told him? She said she wanted books!"

Hermione's face turned crimson when the others burst out laughing. She didn't see what was so funny. "Most kids would want all sorts of toys or sweets. Only Hermione would want books!" He laughed.

"That's what I said," Remus chuckled. Hermione, her face still red, took a bite of her sandwich. Their late lunch was pleasant enough. They spent the rest of the day outside, enjoying the weather. Harmony ended up falling asleep on Tonks, leaving a drool spot in the shape of a raindrop. They had tried to coax Hermione on to a broom, but informed them that she preferred her feet firmly on the ground.

When the temperature dropped, the group went back inside for a light supper before Sirius went to his office to finish up some paper work, leaving Remus to entertain Harry and Hermione while Tonks put

Harmony to bed. He ended up reading them several bedtime stories. *It's nice to just sit back and relax*, she thought.

At half past eight, they were sent to bed, a rule Hermione no longer minded, considering how exhausted she was by the end of each day. She crawled into bed, happy that her life had regained some sense of order. The young witch drifted off to sleep, a small smile gracing her face.

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When morning came, Hermione grabbed what she deemed a suitable outfit before dashing off to shower before the Ministry official came. She supposed that as a six - year - old girl, she didn't need shower, but old habits die hard, and it was a habit she was rather fond of--she hated being dirty, even more so after her extended stay with the Malfoys.

Once dressed, she headed towards the kitchen, where Sirius, Remus and Harry were already sitting. After fixing herself some toast, she sat down to wait for Mr. Sinclair to arrive. "Where's Harmony?" Hermione asked, looking around.

"Dora took her clothes shopping," Remus said. "Your sister is growing pretty fast and needed a few more sets of robes. She'll be back by lunch time."

"Lunch? But who's going to watch Harry? I have to go to a meeting at the Ministry today about the school." Sirius said.

Remus groaned. "I'm sorry, Padfoot, I forgot all about that. I guess he'll have to come with Hermione and I to Malfoy Manor. Is that alright?"

Sirius nodded, a small grin on his face. "It's fine with my, but I don't know how your Ministry boy will take it." He glanced at the clock and stood. "I have to go. See you later Moony, Harry, Hermione. Don't do anything I would."

Just as Sirius apparated away, there was a knock at the door. "That will be Mr. Sinclair," Remus said, moving towards the door. A moment

later Remus escorted him into the room. "So you see, we will have to take Harry with us," he was explaining.

The man sniffed. "Very well. It is time to depart. Due to precautions, we will be taking a portkey," Mr. Sinclair said, pulling a battered looking candlestick from one of his pockets. "If you would, please."

Hermione hesitantly grabbed the portkey, not really wanting to return to Malfoy Manor. Feeling the familiar tug behind her navel, she braced herself. Still, she knew she would have to, if only for the small chance that she could get her hands on Riddle's diary.

When she looked up, she found herself in the very same receiving room she had first arrived in. She pushed aside the fear she could feel growing in the pit of her stomach, but couldn't keep herself from shuddering. She felt the weight of a hand on her shoulder and looked up to see Harry standing behind her, an understanding look in his eyes. He didn't want to be here anymore than she did.

"This way, if you please," the man said. Harry clasped her hand in his and began to follow Mr. Sinclair. He led them through winding walls until at last they reached the biggest library Hermione had ever seen in her life. It was even bigger than the one at Hogwarts.

"Mr. Malfoy had several books in his study, but I've had the elves move them here. I specialize in the detection of Dark Tomes and Artefacts, so if you see any book you should like, I must first check it for any jinxes, hexes, curses and the like. For your own protection, I will be following you to see to it that you do not touch anything that could cause you harm."

Hermione nodded and looked around. She had a lot of work ahead of her if she was going to find that journal. Then she would have to somehow get it past Mr. Sinclair who, true to his word, was following her around. *Well, I might as well get some books out of this, since that's what I'm technically here for,* she thought as she began her search.

Two hours later she was through about one tenth of the Malfoy library, thirteen books richer, and still short a diary. She was ready to scream. Any other day she would have been happy to simply browse through

books, knowing that she would get to keep anything she wanted, but right now her heart wasn't in it, and her mind was on a certain diary.

Feeling a migraine coming on, she looked up to ask Remus if he happened to have any muggle medicine for headaches with him, when something caught her eye. It was a small, thin book with a black, shabby cover, sitting atop a large stack of books set precariously on one of the tables. Hermione felt her pulse quicken. *Riddle's diary. Those are the books that were found in Malfoy's study. Yes, he would keep it there.*

She turned back to the shelf, looking intently at *Dark Creatures of the Deep*. She knew where it was now, she just didn't know how to get it away from Mr. Sinclair without him knowing. If he specialized in detecting Dark Artefacts and the like, he may be able to discover that Riddle's diary is more than it appeared. Of course, it was likely that he would not, but she couldn't take that chance.

"I want this one," she said, handing him a random book.

He looked at her strangely. "You want a book on advanced arithmantic formulas? Do you not think you are a bit young?"

"I'm almost seven," she said calmly. "And I like mathematics, and I think I will like Arithmancy."

"Mmm," he hummed, flicking his wand several times over the large book, a frown on his face. "Perhaps."

Hermione quickly glanced around, noting with relief that no one was paying any attention to her. Carefully, she stepped on one of her shoelaces and moved her other foot back, untying her shoe with ease. "I'm going to go look at the books on the table," she said, trying to keep her voice level and hide her nervousness. She approached the table, forcing herself to walk slowly.

When she was close enough to the table for her plan to theoretically work, she stepped on the shoelace she had untied earlier and allowed herself to trip. She reached out and knocked one of the many stacks of books over, surprised but pleased when it, in turn, collided with another stack of books, sending no less than twenty books

tumbling into disarray. "Oh! I'm so very sorry, I must have tripped over my shoelace," she gasped as the others rushed to make sure she was alright.

"Well, I think we had better clean these up then go and get some lunch." Remus said, kneeling as he picked up one of the books.

"I quite agree," Mr. Sinclair said as he knelt beside the werewolf. Both men had their backs to her.

Hermione reached out and grabbed Riddle's diary. Watching them to be sure they didn't turn around, Hermione quickly tucked the book in her pocket. Once the book was hidden safely away from Mr. Sinclair, she allowed herself to relax a little. Hermione looked up-- right into Harry's curious eyes.

She tilted her head forward, telling him with her eyes that she would explain everything later. He nodded once, telling her that he would wait for an answer. *Now I just have to figure out what I can tell him,* she thought despairingly. Maybe she would take a little longer picking out books than she had intended.

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A/N: Hello everyone. I'm so sorry this took so long, but I've been busy as of late. As for the Latin, I don't speak that language, so everything I used was out of a dictionary and is probably incorrect in some way. However, for future reference, I will give you the translations I found.

Aeternus-- eternal, everlasting

Veneficus-- poisonous, magic

Iniuriosus-- unjust, wrongful, harmful

Odds are in favour that I really didn't do that right, but it was an attempt. On the bright side, my application was accepted over at Portkey, so I'm an official author over there now! Also, thsunami did a fan art of my story. Well, technically, it's a fan art of the Dark Harry before he changed the colour of his eyes, but it's very well done. It's over on Deviant Art, at [http://](http://www.deviantart.com/thsunami/art/Dark-Harry-1000000000) It even had a neat Yoda quote.

Well, thanks to everyone who read, and special thanks to everyone who reviewed. That said, please review!

Cheers,

Madm05

Chapter Twelve: Agreements

"Every thing is going well," Sirius said, a large grin on his face during dinner that night. The ragtag group were eating a gourmet meal of soup and grilled cheese sandwiches. It was the first meal Remus had made without burning. Tonks was conspicuously absent. She had left just before dinner, sharing a conspiratorial glance with Sirius and Remus before heading off to visit with her parents.

"Now the way I figure it, we'll need another house - elf to help with all of the work around here, as Kreacher won't do anything but cry over mother's bloomers. I should probably get rid of him, but I can't risk him blabbing anything he knows. I have a sneaking suspicion that he was the one that told Lucius about Hermione." He took a drink from his cup. He gave Hermione a look. "You know, since you can take anything you want from the Malfoys, maybe you should take one or two of the house - elves."

"I thought you had to be a Master of a household to have a house - elf." Hermione said, her confusion clear.

Remus nodded. "Usually, that's the case, but because this is part of your reward, if you choose to take them, from the *Iniuriosus Act of 1102*."

Hermione opened her mouth to argue that house - elves should be free, should receive a salary and have vacation days, but closed it. *That's not a bad idea. If I take them, then I'll know they won't be sold to some horrible owner. She frowned. Maybe they'll let me free them. No, that won't work, I tried that. Maybe I'll be able to get them to wear uniforms then, instead of rags.*

"Hermione?" Her head snapped up as Remus called her name, concerned. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine, Papa Remus, I was just thinking." She turned to Sirius. "I might do that, take the house - elves I mean."

"So, how was the book hunting expedition today?" Sirius asked.

Remus sighed dramatically. "Hermione is now the proud owner of no less than one hundred and thirty four new books." He gave Sirius a look. "And we have to go back again tomorrow to go through the other half of the library."

Sirius chuckled merrily. "What kind of books did you pick out, Hermione?"

Hermione flushed. "Oh, I just picked some books that looked interesting."

"Some of those interesting books happened to be on advanced Arithmancy, Occlumency, advanced Defence Against the Dark Arts, and several very rare tomes that were thought to be lost." He snorted. "One of those books is worth more than most hard working wizards annual salaries."

"And the paintings," Harry added quietly.

"Ah yes, the paintings." Remus turned to Sirius, his eyes twinkling. "I don't suppose you've realized your dear mother hasn't been screeching at us? Hermione here thought of a brilliant idea while we were at Malfoy Manor. While we were there, Hermione found this painting of your mother's... I think it was her cousin. Well, Hermione asked if she could have that too, though I couldn't imagine why she would want something like that.

"Well, when we got the painting home, Hermione had me hang it up next to your mother's portrait. Well, your mother took the bait and went right over and struck up a conversation about pureblood superiority. Those two old biddies have been chatting up a storm completely oblivious to the rest of us." He grinned.

Sirius smiled in return. "What happens when they realize we're still around?"

"I think she was lonely," Hermione said quietly. "I think she just wanted someone to talk with, so I brought her someone so that she can."

"Only you, Hermione, would care about the feelings of a portrait," Sirius grinned good naturedly, taking the bite out of his words. Hermione smiled sheepishly. "You said painting, meaning more than one. What else did you choose to bring home with you?"

"Just some pictures." Hermione replied casually. "There were some lovely landscapes. There is a beautiful one of a waterfall."

"Painted by Antoine Demitri," Remus smiled. "The wizarding equivalent of Leonardo da Vinci. I have to admit though, Hermione has good taste, and a good eye for things like that." He winked at the young girl. "Most kids would have gone straight for the toys, but not our Hermione. Nope, she went straight for the books," he laughed good naturedly.

"There is nothing wrong with books," Hermione defended herself.

Remus laughed heartily. "We never said there was anything wrong with it, Hermione. Personally, I think it's wonderful that you want to read as much as you do. Many kids don't like reading at all, and they miss out on some wonderful things." He leaned towards her. "Just don't forget that books are not the only companions you have."

Hermione couldn't help but smile as she nodded and turned back to her dinner. It was nice to have someone remind her every now and then that there was a world beyond books. Normally, it would be Harry or Ron who would tell her to take a breath of fresh air, but she hardly knew Ron in this timeline, and Harry spent most of his time trying to come to terms with having killed a man.

Once dinner was cleared, Sirius and Remus shared a look before Remus cleared his throat nervously. "Well you two, Sirius and I have something we would like to discuss with you," he began, his voices trembling slightly. He opened and closed his mouth several times as if searching for words.

"We would like to adopt you two," Sirius said calmly. "What I mean is, I would like to adopt you Harry, and Remus would like to adopt you and Harmony, Hermione. We want to make sure no one can take you away from us ever again, and we want to be your family, if you'll have us."

Remus swallowed thickly. "I understand perfectly if you don't want to," he said to Hermione. "But I thought you might like it. I mean, I know I'm not your father and that I will never replace him," he said softly. "I'm not trying to replace him. But if you would like, I want to--"

"Yes," Hermione interrupted. "I'd like that." She felt a trill of excitement go through her. Family. It had seemed like ages since she had felt like she was part of a family, and this was a step in that direction. She would have a father figure, and at the rate Harmony was charming Tonks and Remus, she would have a mother figure in her life too.

"Ooooo," Harmony cooed happily as her slobber dribbled down her chin.

"Same goes for me, Little Prongs," Sirius said to Harry. "I'm not James, but I made a promise when I became your godfather that I would look out for you as if you were my own son, and I intend to do just that. I couldn't do that before, but I want to now. We want you two to know that we'll take care of you whether you want us to adopt you or not, we just wanted to give you the choice."

"Yes," Harry said, his quiet voice awed. He began to nod, slowly at first then vigorously. "Yes," he said more firmly. "I'd like that too!" His eyes lit up like it was Christmas for the first time in days. He broke out into a grin as he caught Hermione's eye, his excitement shining on his face. She couldn't help but smile in return.

"Wonderful!" Sirius clapped. "See Moony? I told you there was nothing to worry about," he said softly to his friend, but Hermione could hear the relief in his voice. He turned back to the kids. "This calls for a celebratory dessert!" He stood and walked to the counter, a bounce in his step, and pulled a dish towel off of some treat hidden in the corner. He returned to the table to reveal a pumpkin pie.

Harry and Hermione exchanged a glance and eyed the pie warily. The last time Sirius had made dessert, they had all been violently ill afterwards. Sirius rolled his eyes. "Oh come on, I did it right, honestly."

Hermione smirked. "How many tries did it take you to get it right?"

"Three," he admitted sheepishly. "The first time I forgot the eggs," he made a face. "That was a disaster. The second time it was fine, but Dora took it out of the oven and tripped, so the whole thing ended up *all* over the floor. But this," he pointed proudly at the pie, "I have done perfectly. Third time is the charm." He set the pie on the table and struck a dramatic pose. "It was along, perilous journey, and the damage done by the first two failures attempts were great, but in the end, there is Pumpkin Pie." He grinned goofily. "It's my favourite treat."

"I prefer cheesecake," Remus said.

Sirius snorted. "Cheesecake is good, Moony, but nothing is better than Pumpkin Pie."

"I agree with Sirius," Hermione said.

"Me too," Harry agreed. He leaned towards Hermione. "Does it taste good? I've never had it."

"It's a piece of heaven," she whispered back.

Sirius, who was busy gloating over Remus, didn't hear the exchange. "Well, since the majority wins," he flipped a knife in the air and caught it deftly by the handle. "I say we eat." He began to cut five pieces, talking all the while about how wonderful pumpkin pie was compared to cheesecake.

"You're being very childish about this," Remus grumbled as he put one of the pieces on Harmony's tray.

"It's called arrested development, Moon Pie," Sirius said, smirking when Remus scowled. "I freely admit that I was never very mature," he handed Harry a large piece of pie. "I'm worse now though."

Remus sighed mournfully. "And you were granted permission to become a headmaster." He shook his head. "We're doomed."

"Here, have some pie," Sirius said, putting a piece on his plate. "I promise, it will make you feel better." He took the final piece for himself and took a bite. "It always makes me feel better at least." He

sighed contentedly, then looked at Harry, a touch of sadness in his eyes. "You're mother made wonderful pumpkin pie, Harry. It was her recipe that I used, but I'm afraid I didn't do it justice."

Harry nodded as he stared pensively at the far wall. "It's fine Sirius," he said softly before he smiled. "I like it a lot better than the last time you tried to cook!" Everyone laughed, their hearts light.

His eyes alight with a mischievous twinkle, Sirius reached towards Remus' half - eaten piece while the werewolf fed Harmony. "Stay away from my pie, Sirius." Remus turned back and scowled good naturedly at his friend.

"But Moony," Sirius pouted, "I just want to make sure it's safe for you to eat," he said, moving to steal a bite.

"Stop that, Padfoot, or I'll fork you," Remus said, brandishing a fork as though it were a sword. Hermione choked on her juice.

Sirius quirked an eyebrow. "Is that a challenge, Moon Pie?" He casually twirled a spoon in his hand.

Remus puffed out his chest in mock defiance. "It is if you think you're up to it."

"En Guard!" The two men began duelling, Sirius wielding a spoon, Remus a fork. Harry and Hermione shared a glance before they began laughing hysterically.

Harmony, however, did not find the situation funny at all. "No!" The baby yelled, throwing a handful of the pumpkin filling at Sirius, hitting him squarely on the chin. "No!"

Everyone was silent for a moment. "I've been beat by baby," Sirius said softly, as though he couldn't believe what just happened. He began to pout, his pumpkin covered face making Harry and Hermione laugh harder. He stood up and walked to the sink, grumbling about wasted pie.

While his back was turned, Remus snagged a bite of the slice on Sirius' plate, sharing a conspiratorial wink with Harry and Hermione.

By the time Sirius returned, Remus was cooing over Harmony, telling her what a good girl she was for defending him. Sirius didn't seem to notice there was a bite missing from his pie and sat down to eat. He never did catch on to why Harry and Hermione laughed every time they looked at him.

It was some time later that the group walked merrily to the family room to play board games. One of the games Hermione had chosen to keep-- one of Harmony's favourite games when she was older-- was Clue. Because of their ages, they ended up pairing off. Harry and Hermione were partners, and played as Colonel Mustard. Remus and Harmony were teamed up, and played as Professor Plum. Sirius was paired off with Horace, much to everyone's amusement, and for some reason decided to play as Mrs. Peacock.

Hermione had never felt so relaxed since she had accepted her mission. Clue was an intellectually stimulating game that she and Harmony had always enjoyed. Playing Clue as a child had been the beginning of her love for logic puzzles and riddles. It was the very same love that saved Harry on several occasions over the years.

While it was a bit old for Harry, he caught on quickly, and genuinely seemed to enjoy trying to figure out who the villain was. He did have a tendency to want to find the villain as quickly as possible, and often jumped to conclusions based on the evidence he and Hermione had with out questioning the others. Luckily, Hermione was well versed in the ways of Clue, and was able to keep him from losing the game for them before they had barely begun. She doubted he really understood the strategies she was explained to him in hushed whispers while Sirius and Remus pretended they couldn't hear her, but it didn't really matter.

After Harry and Hermione won three games in a row, they decided it was time for bed. "After all, we still need to go through the rest of the Malfoy library and pick up anything else you want from their manor," Remus said.

And so Hermione lay on her bed, waiting for Harry to sneak in. She knew he would; she had promised him an explanation. It was actually shocking that he had managed to go so long without asking her again.

She didn't have to wait long before she heard the creak of the floorboard outside her door before a shaft of light fell across her room. "Hermione? Are you awake?"

"Yes, Harry, I'm awake. Come on in," Hermione replied softly. Harry padded into the room and stood patiently by her bed. The young girl patted a place on her bed across from her and sighed. Most little boys didn't care if they were allowed to sit on someone's bed-- if they wanted to sit there, they did. Harry always waited to be invited, he never asked, he only waited for permission. She didn't know whether she was pleased that he always waited for her permission to sit on her bed or annoyed. She liked that he was polite, but dreaded what the Dursleys had done to him to drill such manners into such a young boy. Even as a child, *she* had never been as polite as Harry.

Harry clambered onto the bed and sat in front of her, crossing his legs and resting his chin on his hands. "So why did you steal that book, Hermione? Why didn't you just ask for it? They would have given it to you."

Hermione drew in a deep breath and prepared to take one of the biggest risks she had ever taken. "That book is actually a diary Harry, and it was very important that I have it. I didn't want to take the chance that Mr. Sinclair wouldn't let me have it."

"Why?" He asked. "The only reason he wouldn't let you have it is if it was dangerous," he frowned. "That's it, isn't it? You want a dangerous book. But why? Why do you want a dangerous book, Hermione? You could get hurt."

She couldn't help the small smile that formed on her lips. It was so like her Harry to try and keep her safe. But now was not the time to reminisce-- there were serious matters to discuss. "Harry," she sighed heavily. "This is very important, okay? I need you to promise you won't tell anyone, okay? No one can know," she leaned forward, "Not even Sirius or Papa Remus, okay? Only you and I, alright?"

Harry stared at her for a long moment before nodding slowly. "This is important, isn't it? This is even more important than you teaching me to use magic, right? I won't tell anyone. I promise."

“Harry, the man who killed your parents, Voldemort?” The young boy nodded. “He’s still alive,” she said bluntly, not knowing how to soften her words. *Harry never liked it when people beat around the bush anyways.* “This diary,” she pulled the small book out of the drawer of her nightstand, where she had hidden it shortly after arriving home, “Was his. But it’s more than that.

“This diary,” she waved it around and lowered her voice. “This diary holds a piece of his soul in it, Harry, and that is why he is still alive.”

Harry scowled at the book. “Then you should burn it, Hermione. You should throw it into the fireplace,” he gestured towards the kitchen.

Hermione shook her head. “I can’t, Harry, not yet.” She bit her lip. “There are more of these.”

He frowned. “More diaries?”

She shook her head. “No, not diaries. Voldemort is an evil man, Harry. He broke his soul up into six pieces.” Hermione reached into her nightstand drawer and pulled out the locket and the bracelet. “One piece of his soul was left in his body, but the other five he put into different things.” Hermione handed him the diary and the jewellery. “These are three of them, Harry. I need to get the other two.”

Harry looked closely at Riddle’s diary and sighed. “I don’t understand, Hermione. I don’t understand why you didn’t just tell them that you wanted the diary. They would have given it to you.”

Hermione shook her head. “They might have,” she took the diary back. “But Mr. Sinclair might have been able to detect that it’s a Dark Artefact.”

The young boy frowned again. “How?”

“This diary holds a piece of Voldemort’s soul. In order to put part of his soul in it, he had to break off some of it,” Hermione gently grabbed his hand. “In order to break off part of your soul, you have to kill someone. That means that Voldemort killed someone, then put the part of his soul in this.” Hermione held up the diary again.

Harry looked mortified. "I k-killed that--"

"That's different Harry," Hermione interrupted before he could voice his fears. "You killed Mr. Malfoy to save me Harry. You didn't kill him to make yourself immortal." Hermione dropped the diary and leaned towards Harry, pulling him into a tight embrace. "That was very brave of you, Harry. Saving me doesn't make you a bad person."

Harry held her tightly as though clinging desperately to a lifeline. There was a long silence as they simply held each other, both unwilling to release the other. Hermione didn't want to let go because she feared he would take the loss of contact as rejection, and Harry didn't want to let go because if Hermione was hugging him, it meant he was a good person, because Hermione would never hug someone who was bad.

Finally, Harry released Hermione and looked down at the objects in his hands in confusion. There was something bothering him, Hermione could tell, but decided to wait for him to tell her. He looked up. "How? How do you know all of this?" He shook his head a little as if he couldn't believe what he was hearing.

If I were in his shoes, I'd lock me up in the nut ward. "I'm a Seer, Harry, remember?" *I hate lying, especially to Harry!* She took a deep breath and continued on. "He's going to come back, Harry." She said quietly as Harry's head snapped up. "Voldemort is going to come back," Hermione leaned forward, "Unless the pieces of his soul are destroyed."

"Will he hurt people?" Harry asked, his voice rough with emotion. Hermione could only bring herself to nod. His face turned blank for a moment before his eyes narrowed. "Who does he hurt?"

"A lot of people," she replied quietly, hoping against hope that he wouldn't push the subject.

"Who?" Harry persisted.

"Sirius, Remus, lots of people you haven't met yet." Hermione hesitated. *Should I tell him? What would he do if he knew I died? Would he become overprotective? Would he want to break off their*

friendship to protect her, like he broke off his relationship with Ginny? She looked into his eyes and couldn't bring herself to lie again. "Me."

Harry dropped his gaze and glared at the three seemingly harmless objects before him. He looked up, fire burning in his emerald eyes. "Do you know what the other things are?"

Hermione nodded slowly. *He isn't*, she thought. *He's too young.*

"Do you know *where* they are?" He continued.

Again, Hermione nodded. *He is*, she realized. *Well, he never did do things like everyone else. How could I have expected any less of him?*

Harry nodded. "What are they? Where are they?"

Hermione frowned. He was going to try and get them himself, just as he had in the other timeline. He was trying to shut her out again. *We'll see about that*, she huffed. "Why do you want to know Harry?"

"Because I want to go them and get rid of them so he can't come back and hurt you and Sirius and Remus," he replied simply. Ah, the innocence of youth and the willingness to talk.

Hermione shook her head again. "That's not the way it works, Harry. I'm not going to let you go off all by yourself, it's too dangerous. You don't know what you're getting into."

"And you could get hurt if you go by yourself," he argued back. He was silent, trying to stare her into submission. Finally he seemed to relent. "I'm not going to let you go alone, Hermione, and you're not going to let me go alone, so why don't we go together?"

She stared at him, thinking about his proposal. It was better than nothing, even if he couldn't do much with his magic yet. With time and training, he could really help her, and it *would* be a good idea for two of them to go, just in case one of them was injured. "Okay," she said slowly, "But--"

"When do we go?" He asked immediately, his expression determined and his face set.

"Not anytime soon," Hermione replied. Harry opened his mouth to argue but Hermione cut him off. "No Harry, neither one of us is ready for this." She sighed heavily and collapsed against her pillows.

"But I came to get you! I learned how to use my magic Hermione. I'm not as good as you are, but..." Harry hesitated before plunging onward. "I don't want Voldemort to come back. He killed my parents Hermione! He's the reason I had to stay with Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon! You said that when he comes back that you and Sirius and Remus get hurt, and I don't want you to get hurt!" His chest was heaving and his eyes were frantic.

"Harry," she soothed, reaching out to rest her hand out to comfort him. "I know, Harry, I really do. It's just that... the pieces of Voldemort's soul... this isn't going to be easy Harry."

"I know that!" He seemed angry, but Hermione knew he was desperate. "I know it's not going to be easy, but--"

"Harry, think of what I went through to get the diary." Hermione interrupted softly. "Think of what I'm still going through! Harry," she said quietly. "If I take one wrong potion, or if someone accidentally gives me something with lacewing flies in it, I'll die. Mr. Malfoy did this to me, Harry, and he was the one who was keeping the diary."

Harry's face paled dramatically as he realized what she was saying. "This is going to be really hard, and it's going to be really dangerous." Hermione bit her lip. "That's why we need to wait, Harry. *Both* of us need to have better control over our magic. And Sirius and Papa Remus will *never* let us do this if they ever find out. Do you see Harry? If we do this, we do it alone. No one can help us, Harry, because they either won't believe us, or they won't let us do it. We're not ready yet."

Ghosts of her past crept into her mind. *This is a grave responsibility you must undertake alone-- no one here will remember anything that has happened here, so there is no one you can go to for advice. If*

you do this, you will do it alone. Hermione shuddered as she recalled Dumbledore's words.

Harry sighed heavily and looked up at her. "When will we be ready?" He asked softly.

Hermione shook her head. "I don't know. We need to train ourselves, then we need to find a way to get away from Sirius and Papa Remus. Then we need to have a way to take care of each other in case one of us gets hurt, so that Sirius and Papa Remus don't find out what we're doing..." She trailed off. Everything seemed so impossible. "And then we have school coming up," Hermione cringed. She hoped she wouldn't have to sit through several lessons of which letters make what sound.

Harry sat quietly, looking deep in thought. "What if... I mean, I have to go back to Aunt Petunia's and Uncle Vernon's every summer, remember? Sirius told me that I could only stay here some of the time, but Privet Drive is my real home because I go to school here. What if we went and looked for them when I have to go over there? We'd have to convince Sirius and Remus to let you go with me, and we'd have to get Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon to let you *stay* there, but... do you think that would work?"

The bushy haired girl looked at Harry, impressed. "I think that's a brilliant idea Harry, but I think we'd better wait for a while before we, you know, go get the pieces of Voldemort's soul." Harry opened his mouth to protest. "We're not ready, Harry." She interrupted, gently resting her hand on his in a comforting gesture. "I don't think we'll ever be ready, not really, but we need to be as prepared as we can be."

Harry sighed heavily but nodded. "I understand Hermione. We'll wait, but not very long, okay? I don't want him to come back and hurt my family."

Family, Hermione thought with a trill of happiness and a smile. *He's never really had a family, but he has one now!* She looked outside, watching the stars twinkle merrily above them. "I think we should go to bed Harry. It's late and I have to go back to Malfoy Manor tomorrow," she shuddered.

Harry nodded his understanding and stood. "Alright Hermione. I'll talk to you tomorrow," he said through a yawn and slipped off her bed, heading towards the door.

As Harry left, Hermione leaned back against her pillows, pondering her day. She couldn't keep herself from grinning. She knew that Harry was too young to be involved in all of this, but then, wasn't he too young for the hand fate had dealt him altogether? It wasn't fair that Harry should have to deal with everything. At least she had agreed to her mission, had willingly accepted her burden.

But now everything is going so well! She thought with a lighter heart. She was free of the Malfoys, she had collected three Horcruxes, and she felt secure in the thought that Harry was going to help her get the remaining two. She knew it was silly, but this was her Harry, and she knew in her heart of hearts, if he were with her, then she could succeed.

Hermione had struggled with herself all day, trying to determine what she should tell him. How many lies? How much of the truth? She was sick of lying-- it wasn't in her righteous nature to lie. She felt her stomach knot as her thoughts took a darker turn. *Where is the little girl who felt so guilty over stealing a sweet that she confessed her crime to her parents?*

It was her unwillingness to lie if she didn't have to that led her to confessing as much of the truth as she could to Harry. She knew he was young, far too young for what she needed to do, but he deserved to know the truth. The last time the truth had been withheld, it had cost him his Godfather's life.

She rolled over onto her stomach and pushed her dismal thoughts away and concentrated on everything that was finally going right. She had three Horcruxes. Remus was going to adopt her. Harry was going to stay with her and fight with her. Together, they would save the world from Voldemort, and prevent a dark future. Hermione smiled and snuggled down into her blankets. She drifted off to sleep, hoping against hope that Morpheus would bring her pleasant dreams.

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The Dark Harry was walking calmly down a corridor, his immaculate black robes billowing behind him. Hermione followed as he made several turns until they reached what she recognized as the library door. Without pausing, the Dark Harry pushed the door open and walked in.

The familiar face of Vincent Crabbe snapped up at the sound of the door opening. The young man immediately leapt to his feet, his expression terrified. "C-can I help you, Milord?" He stuttered out.

Harry smiled winningly. "Surprisingly, yes you can." He casually strolled forward. "Why don't you have a seat Vince? You don't mind if I call you Vince do you? Oh good. I knew you wouldn't mind. Sit, Vince, sit." He gestured to the chair Crabbe had been sitting in. "You look a bit pale, Vince, are you alright?"

The other man nodded vigorously. "Quite alright Milord. Fine. Fantastic. Wonderful. Never been--"

"Shut up," Harry said, brushing non-existent lint from his robes. Crabbe's mouth snapped shut. Harry looked up. "There's a bit of a problem with that ritual you found to bring Hermione back," he began, his pose was casual but his eyes glittered dangerously. "Do you know what that might be?"

"N-no Milord." Crabbe replied, a look of terror on his face. He looked as though he was staring at the Grim Reaper. *In a way, he is.*

"Hermione's been having dreams. Strange, recurring dreams." He tossed a journal onto the table. "After the first few, she decided to keep a journal of everything that was happening." He leaned forward. "Now, Hermione has never had these dreams before. She's only been having them since we brought her back.

"Three days, Vince. You have three days to read that journal and provide me with a logical explanation why the love of my life is having these dreams." He rested his head in his hand as he stared passively at the trembling man before him. "Of course, considering that my Hermione should have never have had to deal with these dreams, it's rather generous of me to give you three days, don't you agree?"

"Y-yes s-sir. V-very gen-generous s--"

"I don't speak babble Vince, so you're going to have to be a bit clearer," the Dark Harry said, his eyes glinting dangerously, betraying his annoyance despite his passive face.

Crabbe cleared his throat nervously. "Yes Sir, it's very generous of you to give me three days."

The Dark Harry grinned cheerfully. "So glad you agree, Vince! And as a friendly reminder..." With the speed of a striking viper, the Dark Harry conjured a knife and slammed it down, the blade going through the back of Crabbe's left hand and striking the table. Crabbe's eyes bulged, and his mouth hung open in a silent cry. Hermione felt her stomach turn as the blood began to flow, slowly at first, but soon blood was gushing from the wound.

"Do you like my knife, Vince? I conjured it myself you know. It's a bit of an experiment. I believe that I have conjured an enchanted knife that will cause wounds that cannot be healed. You're my first test, aren't you lucky? You will let me know if that nasty little cut heals won't you? I hope it doesn't, otherwise I'll have to go back to the drawing board.

"Three days, Vince, to figure out what you did wrong and how to fix it." He hissed, his eyes narrowed. "And it had better be worth the wait." The Dark Harry released the handle of the knife and stood calmly, smoothing out invisible wrinkles in his robes. "Have a nice day, Vince, and happy hunting." He walked towards the door, a slight bounce in his step.

"Oh, and Vince?" He turned back. The quaking man looked up from his weak attempts to grab the handle and remove the knife. "Don't even think of bleeding on the books. It would upset Hermione." He stood calmly, clearly waiting for something

"Yes Milord," Crabbe rasped.

The Dark Harry smiled and turned away once more, this time walking out of the library without a backwards glance.

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Hermione jerked awake, her heart pounding in her chest. She trembled as she wiped the cold sweat away from her brow. *Wish, not granted.* Looking out the window, she could see the faintest of rays on the horizon. Deciding it was pointless to try to sleep, Hermione slipped out of bed to get ready for the day.

When she met up with Harry later that morning, she found he acted more like he had before he had killed Lucius Malfoy. The only difference was this time there was a glint of grim determination. Hermione wondered again if she had made the right decision.

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A/N: I'm really sorry it took so long, but hey, at least I didn't take a month like certain other authors whom I'm still waiting on. It seems that just when things started to calm down, everything got hectic, all over again. To top it off, wouldn't let me log in for two days! Go figure.

I thought it would be fun to visit with the Dark Harry. I was actually waiting for an excuse to write him, so I thought, why not? There was also a reviewer who brought up writing an Omake. I thought about it, but I decided to get your opinions on it. I've never done one before, and it may be fun to try, but I would need some advice on how to go about it. I prefer irony to humour, and I have a rather dry sense of humour to begin with. So, should I give it a try? If so, how should I go about it? Any suggestions? You get the point.

Well, thank you for reading and waiting, and special thanks to those who reviewed. Please read and review!

Cheers,

Madm05

Chapter Thirteen: Lessons

Hermione stood nervously in front of the mirror and tried to smooth down her bushy hair. *Get a hold of yourself girl! It's not like you're facing the Spanish Inquisition!* She swallowed, thinking briefly that the Spanish Inquisition may be kinder to her than what she was about to face. Gathering her Gryffindor courage and squaring her shoulders, Hermione walked to her bedroom door, hesitated, then finally leaving her sanctuary. She wished she had stayed there.

"Mum, don't you love me anymore? Why are you leaving me here?"

"I don't wanna!"

"Do I get my own room? Can I have a pet? Can I have that dog over there with the shiny medal on his collar?"

"Not right now! Mummy's busy!"

"Mum! Ginny's being herself again! Make her stop!"

"Hermione," Harry said coming up from behind her. "I'm afraid." He began to tug nervously on his new robes, a birthday gift from Tonks. Hermione felt a brief pang of regret. Harry had opened his gifts while she was at St. Mungo's-- an attempt by Sirius and Remus to cheer Harry up-- and she hadn't been able to see it.

Hermione pushed her thoughts away and looked out at the chaos before her. Mothers and fathers, all of whom looked a bit frazzled, were chasing young children around. She thought she saw something that looked suspiciously like a firecracker soar through the air, but she couldn't be sure. The staff members of the Marauders School for Children were milling about, meeting and greeting. Hermione swallowed and took his hand. "It's alright, Harry. I'm scared too." *Who wouldn't be?*

"Do we have to go out there too? I'd rather just stay in my room. Or your room. We could both stay in your room and practice," he said, a pleading note in his voice.

Hermione sighed. She would have liked to go back into her room and practice magic with Harry. She would even have preferred to simply sit in her room, pondering the many complications she was dealing with.

Her dreams had taken a strange turn as of late. The Dark Harry had learned her older self was having strange dreams and determined to find the cause. Hermione couldn't help but wonder what her other self dreamt of each night. Whatever it was, the Dark Harry didn't like it. When Crabbe had failed to provide an explanation, the Dark Harry had magically removed all of the bones in his body and tossed him into the lake outside Hogwarts. He had a good laugh, watching as Crabbe died. In the five weeks since she has the dream, he had gone through nearly a dozen others. Taking her cue from her counter part, Hermione took the journal Remus had given her and begun keeping track of her dreams.

And then there were her lessons on magic with Harry. Lately she had taken to teaching him the basics of Occlumency, and he taught her how to use her magic to fly. True, he didn't know why he was learning Occlumency, but she found he liked their nightly meditations. This would be good practice should anything go wrong in the future.

And that led Hermione to another thought. *Ironic, really. I tried so hard at the beginning of this to keep as much the same as possible, and now I've changed history entirely.* The young witch cursed her luck. In one fell stroke, she had changed everything she had ever known, single handed. Now she had resorted to damage control. It was imperative that she find and destroy the Horcruxes. Preventing Voldemort's rise was the only way she could think of to prevent Harry himself from taking the Dark Lord's place.

Alas, though Hermione would have loved nothing more than to be allowed to sit in her room and think, she was expected to take the official tour of the school with her future peers. "Come on, Harry. The sooner we get this over with, the sooner we get to do something fun," she said, crossing the threshold of the official dormitory wing.

As if their entrance was the sign he had been waiting for, Sirius stood up on a small stage he had set up for the sole purpose of speaking to

the parents and future students. "Welcome! Welcome everyone, to the Marauders School for Children. As you all know, school will officially begin tomorrow, and I would like to take this time to introduce all of the staff members so that everyone will know who is who." Sirius smiled warmly.

"First, I would like to introduce our cleaning staff. We have six house - elves who will be taking care of the house. We did have another, but he met with an unfortunate accident." Hermione barely repressed a snort. Oh, Kreacher had had an accident, all right. Dobby had overheard Kreacher insulting both herself and Harry. The result was not very pleasant for Kreacher.

Sirius glanced at Hermione. Understanding what he was asking of her, Hermione stepped forward and called out, "Topsy, Bopsy, Woddles, Lock, Winky!" The five elves popped into view, taking in the scene before them. Topsy was the Head - elf. She was in charge of the staff as the most senior of the group. Bopsy was her son, and Woddles was his wife. Lock and Winky were their children. Hermione had been shocked to find Winky there, knowing that she had belonged to Mr. Crouch. She had discovered that there had been a contract between stating Malfoy and the new Minister that when Winky became an adult house - elf, she would be sold to Mr. Crouch.

Harry stepped up beside Hermione. "Dobby!" He called. With another pop, Dobby appeared beside Winky. All of them were dressed in uniforms-- Hermione had insisted.

"Everyone, these are the house - elves of our school. They will be cooking the meals and they will be cleaning the house. They will not, however, clean the dormitories. After much thought and a lengthy lecture from a certain young witch," he glanced at Hermione, "It has been decided that the children will be cleaning their own rooms." There was some noise of disagreement among the parents. "This is to teach them how to care for and clean up after themselves. Tidiness is a skill many do not learn until late in life. Perhaps this will speed the process up a bit," he appeased.

"At the insistence of their owners--" Hermione coughed loudly and scowled. "--At the insistence of their employers," Sirius continued

much to the confusion of the adults. "Topsy, Bopsy, Woddles, Lock, Winky and Dobby are to be treated with respect. They are not to be ordered, but rather you are to ask them for things. If you do not ask, and if you do not say please, the house - elves will not obey you."

"That's ridiculous!" One man shouted. "That's his house - elves. Don't matter what you tell them to do!"

Sirius stiffened. "And asking for something and saying please is considered common courtesy." Sirius returned, his jaw set. The other man was quiet. "I know not all of you will agree with how this school is going to be run. After all, treating living, breathing creatures like house - elves with respect is rather strange, isn't it?" Many looked away. "After being lectured for a painstaking two and a half hours, I have come to agree that house - elves are powerful creatures in their own right and deserve our respect. As such, respect for all magical creatures is one of the many things we will be teaching the children here."

"And just who is this *employer* that treats house - elves so well? They all look a bit worse for wear, if you ask me," another man said, nodding at the ragged looking house - elves. While Winky was unharmed, likely because she was to be sold, Dobby and the rest all had bandages on their fingers or ears. Poor Woddles had had her entire left arm in bandages, as well as her ears and nose.

Hermione scowled at the man. "I am their employer, and they are in the state they are in because their former owner had no respect for them," she said stepping forward.

The man looked nervously around the room before arrogantly puffing out his chest. "You can't own them, you're Hermione the Wandless Witch Granger, a Muggleborn. You've no wizarding family, and you're certainly not of age to proclaim yourself the head of your household. You can't own them."

Many adults began to nod their heads and turned back to Sirius, so hear his reply. This in turn made Hermione angry, as she hated being ignored. She opened her mouth to retort, but Remus spoke first.

“Actually, Hermione does employ them. As I’m sure you all know, Hermione was granted the right to take what she pleased from her former caretakers,” Remus said carefully, noticing that the last Malfoy was in the same room, glaring daggers at Hermione. “She chose to take the house - elves. In accordance to the law, they are sworn to serve me, as her legal guardian until she is of age, but I have elected to step aside in favour of allowing Hermione to act as their employer. She has requested that we treat these house - elves with respect.” The man shifted, uncomfortable with the idea of treating a house - elf with respect, but nodded.

“And if you please, her name is Hermione Granger-Lupin. It would be appreciated if you would address her as such, and not with that foolish moniker,” he said, his tone sharp and defensive, like any good parent defending their child’s right to be carefree. The man looked properly chastised, and Hermione felt a swell of pride in her adopted father.

Sirius nodded. “As we said, the house - elves here are to be treated with respect. As for introductions, I am Sirius Black the headmaster of the Marauders School for Children, and I will be giving flying lessons to the children. Yes, I am aware that these lessons are covered at Hogwarts, but I thought it would be fun for the children to have lessons in advance for any airborne games they may wish to play.

“Remus Lupin is the deputy headmaster, and will also be teaching reading and writing to the younger children here. He will also have more advanced reading courses for the older children at our school.

“Nymphadora Tonks,” Sirius said, ignoring his cousin’s glare. “Or just Dora, will also be running a Day Care for the younger children we offer for working parents with younger kids. Anyone who is three or younger will be placed in our day care. Learning there will focus mostly on colours, shapes and letters.

“Andromeda Tonks will be teaching the young ladies the proper etiquette for getting along in our world. Teaching the boys proper etiquette will be Michael Davies. Likewise, Andromeda Tonks will also be giving voice lessons.

"We are pleased to say that we will be offering several instrument choices for the children to learn. Ted Tonks will be teaching the piano, the viola, the violin, and the cello amongst others. He is rather gifted musically.

"We also offer seven foreign languages for the children to learn. Mr. Thomas Moon will be teaching Latin, French, Italian, and Spanish. Miss Wanda O'Dell will be teaching Russian, German and Swedish. It's typical for wizarding children to learn at least two foreign languages, one of them being either French or Italian, since any families have a French or Italian connection of some sort. We thought it might be more fun for the children if they had a wider variety of languages to choose from for the third."

Hermione's interest was piqued by the mention of foreign languages. She was already fluent in some of them, like Latin, which was very handy for remembering spells, Spanish and French. Italian sounded like it would be fun to learn, but she couldn't help but be intrigued by the others as well. At least she would get to learn two. Maybe she could talk Remus into letting her learn all four of the languages that she didn't know.

"I would also like to introduce Stefano Valentino," Sirius gestured to a dark skinned man with coal black hair. "All the way from Italy to teach the children about the arts. He can act as well as he can draw or paint, and has quite the reputation in Italy." Hermione cringed. She had the artistic talent of a bull frog and the acting talent of a howler monkey. *Let the humiliation begin.*

"In the springtime we will be joined by our horseback riding instructor, Mr. Jerry Connor. The fencing instructor, Louis McClain will be joining us in a few days, but couldn't make it today due to a previous engagement.

"And, of course, I have set up a direct connection with St. Mungo's, just in case there should be an accident of any sort. Your children will be well cared for," Sirius said reassuringly.

"I know it seems as if the staff is a bit small, but we only have a twenty two students, and that is including the two in Day Care. We do expect to expand in the future, but for now we are happy to provide

more individual attention to the children,” Sirius concluded the introductions with an easy - going grin. “So,” he clapped his hands together. “If there are no questions about the staff, we’ll begin the tour.”

Sirius began to lead everyone through the school, indicating the forbidden areas and reassuring the parents that wards had been set up so that only someone of legal wizarding age could cross. “Alastor Moody drew this age line, so I don’t think the kids will be able to slip past it.”

Hermione nodded to herself. She was glad that they had chosen an age line. The forbidden areas housed all of the magical items the house - elves could find in Grimmauld Place. During their free time, Sirius and Remus had been going through them, giving Dark Artefacts to the aurors and keeping the other items in safe places, away from the hands of children.

“This is the dining hall. There will not be a set table arrangement, like at Hogwarts. There aren’t any houses because we encourage friendship between all of the children, not just like - minded children. The way we see it, there will be enough competition in Hogwarts when they are divided into houses. We are offering them the chance to make friends with a variety of kids their age, not only those that are in their house.” Sirius was saying.

“This,” he pointed down a well - lit corridor, “Is one of the dormitories. Boys rooms are on the left, girls on the right. There are three floors that the dorms are divided up in, but on each floor are two staff members, one male, one female. This is so that the children can have easy access to an adult should an accident occur.” He gave them a solemn look. “We take the welfare of your children very seriously here. They will not be at risk.”

Many parents began to murmur amongst themselves, seeming pleased to know their children would be well cared for. “Hey, uh, I was wondering, how long will you be keeping our kids? Will you be keeping as long as they do at Hogwarts or what?” One man asked.

Remus nodded and stepped forward. “You will find that our schedule is far different from Hogwarts. For one thing, we start one month after

they do. Also, we won't be keeping your kids the entire time. The children should be brought to school on Monday mornings and picked up to go home Friday afternoon, at four o'clock. We provide all meals for the children for no extra cost.

"If something should happen and a parent cannot pick up their child, we are willing to keep them as long as necessary. Likewise, if any of you do not like the idea of leaving your children here for that length of time, arrangements can be made for you to drop off and pick up your children everyday. The exception is the Day Care. Any children in the Day Care must be dropped off every morning and picked up every evening. They are very young, after all, and need to spend more time with their family than the older children. We don't want to come between you and your children, rest assured," Remus concluded then gestured to Sirius.

"Right. Now, if you'll follow me, I'll show the classrooms," Sirius gestured towards the staircase. Hermione sighed, shared a bored look with Harry, then obediently followed everyone up the stairs. The tour continued on. Hermione was secretly amazed at how professional Sirius was through it all, considering his playful personality.

Once the tour finally finished-- none too soon for Harry and Hermione-- and the group had walked through the entire house - turned - school, Sirius invited everyone to dinner. It was a long, laborious process for Harry and Hermione, who were always in the spotlight for one reason or another. First they cooed over Harry, and how polite he was, then they cooed over her, and how sweet she was. Hermione felt like she was going to be ill.

It didn't help that Draco Malfoy had kicked her in the shin on the way to the table and made her knock a glass over. The only benefit she could see was that everyone was staring at her, and didn't see Harry and Draco glaring daggers at each other. She could already tell that they were going to cause problems. Truthfully, she hadn't expected any differently. While living with the Weasleys may curtail his prejudice, she didn't think anything would dull his hatred of her and anything associated with her. Trying to explain to him that his father was a cruel and evil man was pointless.

“Well,” Remus said standing when at last the torturous meal was over. “Sirius and I thought it might be nice to let the children get to know each other a little bit and give all of the parents here the chance to speak with the staff. If the children would be so kind as to follow me,” Remus said, stepping towards the door that led to the art room.

Harry and Hermione obediently stood and followed Remus to the door, the other kids following their example after much prodding from their parents, and much grumbling on their part. Hermione had been hoping they might go to the library, but it seemed she was doomed to art room. She shuffled in, following behind Harry as the adults began to speak with the instructors. She would rather face a room full of dementors than a room full of art supplies-- dementors at least wouldn't be nearly as embarrassing. This was a disaster waiting to happen.

“Okay,” Remus said standing in the front of the room. “Why don't all of you pick a seat at one of the tables. I thought it might be fun for you to draw some pictures, yes, even those of you who think you are too old for this sort of thing, alright? Now, I want you all to draw a picture of your favourite animal, and when we're all done, each of you can come up to the front of the room, show us your picture, and tell us what your favourite animal is, okay?”

With that, Remus gave his wand a sharp flick and silently summoned several pieces of parchment and a large assortment of crayons. The group of kids all began their task, working diligently in their quest to have the best picture out of everyone. Hermione was more concerned with having her picture actually resemble an animal and not a blob.

Crookshanks is a cat, she thought, I shouldn't have too much trouble drawing a cat. Biting her lip, Hermione grabbed an orange crayon, intending to draw a picture of her beloved Crookshanks. Of course, Crookshanks was much more ragged looking than the cat in her picture, so Hermione set to work making the cat hair look thick and fluffy, just like Crookshanks. When at last she finished, Hermione looked happily at her picture of her adorable cat-- she even made the cat in the picture was bowlegged.

“What is that?” Ginny Weasley had peaked over at Hermione’s picture and snorted. “You were supposed to draw an animal, not a bush!”

“It is so an animal! I’ll have you know it’s a--”

“Hey, you drew a bush, not an animal,” Cho Chang said snootily. “What are you, stupid? You’re going to get into trouble.”

“Hey,” Harry interrupted. “Hermione says it’s an animal, so it’s an animal.” Harry’s words did little to help Hermione, as his expression made it clear that he, too, thought she had drawn a bush.

“It’s a cat.” She said firmly. *I knew this was going to be bad, but not this bad! Can no one see the cattiness of my cat?*

“*That* is not a cat,” Marietta Edgecomb said superiorly from her seat beside Cho Chang. “*This* is a cat,” she said, holding up her own well-drawn picture of a calico cat.

Cho Chang began to laugh and Hermione wondered if this Cho Chang and Marietta Edgecomb somehow knew about the sneak jinx from her fifth year, or if they were channelling their other selves. *Oh great, not only to I have to keep Harry from turning evil, now I have to deal with bad Karma!*

Hermione groaned. “Give me trolls. Give me basilisks. Give me dementors,” she mumbled under her breath. “But Merlin, please don’t make me have to deal with these people on a regular basis.”

Hermione looked up at the surrounding group. All of the girls were glaring at her, while most of the boys were trying to sabotage the other boys’ pictures. Harry was the only one still working. He was colouring the ground underneath of a dog green. *Maybe*, she thought with dark humour, *the girls have realized that I’m going to marry Harry when we are older and they aren’t.* Hermione smirked to herself. *Plain Hermione Jane-- one point. Beauty Queens-- nothing!* She felt a glow of triumph, then immediately felt guilty for her thoughts. The other girls were a bit young for that sort of behaviour. They were probably angry with her because her adopted father was part of the staff. Still, it was a nice to think that people were jealous of her.

"How is everyone doing over here? Oh, Hermione! Sweet Pea, while that is a lovely picture of a bush, even if it is an unusual colour, you were supposed to draw an animal. Why didn't you do what I asked?"

Hermione's head hit the table with a resounding *thunk*. Artistic talent of a bullfrog, indeed.

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Later that night, after the cat - bush fiasco, Hermione sat on the edge of her bed, waiting patiently. She glanced at the clock and frowned. Harry was never this late. She was debating with herself whether or not she should go looking for him, when her door creaked open and a small form slipped in.

"I'm sorry Hermione. Papa Sirius and Uncle Remus were walking up and down the halls, checking to make sure the others weren't wondering around," he said, standing by her bed.

Hermione sighed. "We're just going to have to be more careful from now on. Come on, let's get started for tonight," she said, slipping off the bed and walked to the centre of the room.

Harry followed suite. "What are we doing tonight?"

"I thought we'd work on flying some more-- I think I'm finally getting the hang of it-- then go on to meditation. I was reading that book I took from the Malfoys, and I found a new way to calm yourself after rigorous activity." Hermione said.

He sighed. "Why do we have to learn Occlumency, Hermione? I mean, you don't need to learn it, you have it naturally, and why would anyone want to read my mind?"

"First of all, Harry, Occlumency is not reading someone's mind, it's looking into it and seeing images," she explained briefly. "And we both need to learn it. There are a lot of people who don't like us Harry, and Occlumency protect us from them." She solemnly looked into his eyes. "People hate us because they think I killed Lucius Malfoy and because my parents are-- were-- muggles, and they know that you

defeated Voldemort. They will try to hurt us, and Occlumency will protect us.”

“How? How can Occlumency protect us from them? I mean, they’re grownups, aren’t they more powerful than us? Aren’t they better at magic than us?” Harry asked. “We’re just kids.”

Hermione sighed. She loved Harry, but sometimes she really hated it when he had an intelligent thought. It made it that much harder to get him to do what she wanted, and she wanted him to learn Occlumency so that Voldemort couldn’t learn what they were doing through their link. Unfortunately, she couldn’t very well tell Harry that he was linked to the Dark Lord so she had to come up with another argument.

“Harry,” she began, “We’re not *just* kids. You and I, we’re really powerful,” *you more than me*. “We can do this.” She could tell her words were beginning to work. He just needed a little more convincing. “Besides, you don’t want Uncle Sirius and Papa Remus to find out, do you?” *And I’ve got you, hook, line and sinker*, she thought as he shook his head and agreed.

Hermione smiled to herself in private satisfaction. Her smile dimmed when she remembered that she was manipulating her best friend, but she pushed it away, knowing that what she was doing was for the best. One day, if Harry ever understood his connection to Voldemort, he would thank her for this, especially if it got him out of Occlumency lessons with Snape. She suppressed a shudder at the thought of the Half - Blood Prince and focused on Harry. *I will do what I have to do*.

“Right, so let’s work on flying first,” the young witch said. A moment later, both of them were hovering a foot off of the ground. “Good, we need to work on our agility right now, so--”

“Agility?” Harry asked.

“Speed,” Hermione said, then summoned her blue dog to her. “We’ll practice throwing Disco back and forth and catching him, okay?”

Harry nodded in agreement. And so a game began, with Harry and Hermione trying to catch the little blue dog more times than the other. It was this activity that caused them a great deal of trouble. They had

become so involved in their game of catch, that they forgot what exactly they were doing. They never even noticed the door open, and they certainly didn't see Sirius watching them fly around the room, tossing Disco back and forth. Lost in their game, they were blissfully unaware of anything. "Bloody Hell!" Sirius breathed amazedly, catching Harry and Hermione's attention.

Their concentration broken, both plummeted to the ground while Sirius stood transfixed. Harry was lucky enough to land on the bed. Hermione, however, landed hard on her behind. "Oh, my bum!" She moaned. "I think I landed on my tailbone."

"You have a tail?" Harry slid off the bed. "Let me see!"

"That's enough, you two," Sirius said solemnly, regaining their attention. "I think the both of you need to come with me. Right now," he gestured to the hall behind him. The pair stood and gave each other a grave look. If Sirius' attitude was any indication, they were in a lot of trouble.

Idiot! She mentally kicked herself as she and Harry followed Sirius down the hall. *How could you have let your guard down? You should have been paying attention to what was going on. You shouldn't have let yourself get all caught up in some silly game.*

"Sirius?" Remus asked when they walked into his official office. "What's going on? Has something happened?"

"Yes, something has happened. Guess who I just found flying around Hermione's room," he gave Remus a solemn look, "*Without* a broom."

Remus' face turned ashen. "Oh my." He swallowed. "Both of them?"

Sirius nodded. "Guess what else they were doing. Playing catch." He began to pace angrily. "They were just tossing Hermione's stuffed animal back and forth, like it was no big deal that they were hovering several feet off of the floor," he turned angrily towards them. "Like they couldn't have been *hurt* if they were a little less careful, like they couldn't have misjudged something and *died*." He ran his fingers through his hair, panting for breath, trying to regain his calm.

He's afraid, she realized. They both are.

Remus sat in silence, staring at her, his eyes boring into hers. He seemed to be waging some sort of war within himself. "Hermione, can I speak with you?" She gave a tentative nod. He turned to Sirius. "Don't say anything you'll hate yourself for later, Padfoot," he said with a nod to Harry. For the first time, Hermione looked over at Harry and saw that he was pale as a ghost, and looked mortified.

Reluctantly, Hermione followed Remus into a small room connected to his office, housing several filing cabinets. For a long moment, they only stared at each other. Eventually, Remus knelt down so that he was on her level. "How long have you two been doing this, practicing magic?"

"A few months," she replied quietly.

He nodded to himself. "I wouldn't be able to stop you from teaching Harry to use magic if I tried, would I?"

"No," she said softly, deciding not to lie. She hated lying.

He nodded slowly then sat down on the ground and stared at the wall pensively. "I've thought an awful lot about you, Hermione. Do you know what I've discovered?" She shook her head. "That you are a mystery. One minute you are playing muggle board games just like any other child, and the next you're reading advanced books on Occlumency." She stiffened. "Oh yes, I know what you read. You've left a few of your books on the tables on occasion.

"And then I think of how you dealt with the Malfoys. You never cried, did you? I will not ask you why you never cried, no matter what they did, and I will not ask you how you held up better against Malfoy than grown wizards before you have. Each time I think of it, I realize all over again that you are a most extraordinary child."

He looked at her. "There is so much about you that I do not know, so much that I truly believe I will never know. Do you know what you look like to me, Hermione?" Again she shook her head. "You look like a child carrying a burden you should not have to bear. You and Harry are the same that way.

"I have decided, Hermione, that I'm not going to try and stop you, because I do not think it will do any good. You have set your mind to this, and I know, somehow, that when you've set your mind to something there is no stopping you." Remus sighed heavily.

"I will not pretend to know the burdens of seeing the future, of knowing what will, what will not, and what may, happen. I will not pretend to know why, or even how, you taught Harry wandless magic. I will not ask you that.

"In the time that you have spent with me, with us, I have come to understand that I will never know what is going on inside your head." He stopped suddenly and stared at her. "But Hermione, please, do not practice magic alone. I know that I will never be able to keep you from using your magic, and I think it is wonderful that you've taught Harry, but it is very dangerous to do this by yourself. Please," he grasped her hands gently in his. "Don't do this alone. Let us help you, even if there is only a little we *can* do."

Hermione was struck by how much she and Remus were alike. She had said something very similar to Harry when he tried to push her and Ron away when they were nearly killed trying to get the Hufflepuff cup. What was more, he was going to let them learn magic, better, he was going to help. She nodded, unable to speak her gratitude.

"Good," he smiled and pulled her into a hug. "Hermione," he said softly as he released her. "You and Harry will have to sit out during play time for the next two weeks." Her jaw dropped. "Well, you were braking the rules, and what you were doing was very dangerous," he explained. "You need to learn that even though you're my daughter now, that I'm not going to treat you different than the other children, okay? Now, I'll talk with Sirius about this, and then *all* of us will speak with Professor Dumbledore, you remember him, don't you? We will speak to him on this matter this Saturday."

Hermione sighed and nodded. "I understand." She felt more than a little childish as they walked back into his office-- she was mentally nineteen years old, now, but she had really come to enjoy play time.

The pair walked in and saw Harry and Sirius sitting together on the floor, talking quietly. "I think they'll be a while longer. How about I walk you to your room?"

Hermione nodded her agreement just as she caught Harry's eyes with hers. *It's going to be okay*, she told him with her eyes. Harry nodded and smiled in return. *It's going to be okay*, she thought to herself.

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A/N: I'm so very sorry that this took so long, but I was attacked by a plot bunny in the form of *Home*. If you're feeling froggy, you may want to check it out. I can only promise that the story is better than my summary-- I didn't want to give a way a very big twist. I will say, however, that I'm apparently the first to have ever written anything like it. For anyone reading *Home*, I have decided to do a third chapter.

Before anyone argues that Remus would never let Hermione practice magic like before, he's not. She and Harry can still practice, but they have to have an adult around to make sure they don't do anything dangerous. He also realizes that whatever Hermione is doing, she is doing for a reason, and as he believes she is a Seer, he thinks she is preparing Harry for what is to come. He would rather they practice where they can be looked after, than practice in secret where one or both of them may be hurt.

That said, I would like to thank everyone who read last time, and special thanks to those who reviewed. Please read and review!

Cheers,

Madm05

Chapter Fourteen: Solutions

It was strange that the walk to Hogwarts castle seemed so short. It had never been this short before—it has always seemed far too long, in fact. Now, however, it seemed that no sooner had she set foot on the oft-travelled path did she take a step onto the cool steps leading to the entrance. Horace, who had whimpered and whined until he was permitted to join them on their trip, trotted happily before them, covered in soot from flooing to Hogsmeade, though his Order of Merlin was still gleaming brightly in the sunlight. Harmony remained at home, under Tonks' watchful eye.

In the days that had passed since she and Harry had been caught, so much and yet so little had happened. School officially started, but she was so far ahead in all the classes, that she felt like her brain was actually shrinking from having to hear the everyone sing the alphabet song over and over. By the end of each day, she had to recite several potions recipes, history of magic facts, and various spells to herself, just to prove that she hadn't become dumber from everything she had endured.

Then there was Malfoy. He was still very angry with her for having landed him with the Weasleys. While Hermione had no doubt that Malfoy was redeemable, and that Molly Weasley would do her best to be his redeemer, she also didn't doubt that it would be a long time before Draco would become a better person. He was still too bitter, as it was made obvious when he was caught dumping green paint in her shoes. Thankfully, Remus had caught and punished him for it *before* she had put her shoes on.

Harry had been rather depressed. Sirius and Remus had taken to patrolling their hall far more often than the others, so she and Harry never had the chance to visit each other, as was their habit, even when they weren't practicing magic. She had tried to cheer him up through out the day, but Harry had become used to spending more time with her than he was just then, and he didn't like the changes in his life.

On the bright side, Harry turned out to be a promising student, so long as she tutored him. Having spent six years drilling spells and

history of magic facts into his head, she knew the best methods for teaching him. Under her guidance, he was quickly becoming a very intelligent boy. It made her glow with pride to watch him succeed. It was in those moments that she wished the Dursleys of her timeline could see Harry— doubtless they were responsible for his belief that he wasn't any good at anything. What she wouldn't give for them to look at him in all of his shining glory, basking in the love of people who cared for him and growing into a wonderful person. *Oh, if they could see him now.*

The only problem she had was that her time with Harry had caused a rift between herself and the others. Her only friends were Harry and Neville. Neville even had some measure of popularity. Harry had become quite popular, though she had little doubt that it was from his famous scar more than his bashful personality. But while everyone wanted to play with Harry or sit with him and were outraged to find that he was banned from playtime for two weeks, they didn't care about her.

Having been on the receiving end of such remarks before, she was able to hide her pain with ease. *Who ever said 'sticks and stones may brake my bones but words will never hurt me' must have lived in a cave all their life. Idiot had no idea what he was talking about.* Still, she held her chin high and ignored them as best she could, never showing how their harsh words affected her. Children, she knew, could be very cruel. She only hoped that they would become kinder as they became older.

On top of all that, was what Hermione called The Look. No matter where she went, Sirius, Remus, or one of the Tonks' was always present, giving her The Look. It was a look that said 'I want to know what you're up to' and it was really getting on her nerves. Worse, they were taking great pains to act like she had never been caught flying around her room with Harry, knowing that she was going to have to face the headmaster.

Suddenly Horace began to bark excitedly and ran off towards Hagrid's hut and his dog Fang. Horace ran circles around Fang, who appeared to be cowering and trying to find a way to get away from the young, energetic, dog.

“Ah, Horace,” Sirius chuckled. “Never a dull moment when he’s around.” He turned to his friend. “Does Professor Dumbledore know we’re coming, Moony?”

“I owed the headmaster a few days ago, so he knows, though considering this *is* Professor Dumbledore, he probably already knew,” Remus nodded. “He said he’d send someone to greet us, but he couldn’t tell me who because things at Hogwarts can be hectic sometimes.”

“Indeed,” a silken voice said. “I was in the process of brewing potions needed in the infirmary when the Headmaster informed me I was to fetch you. Apparently he doesn’t trust you to remember the way to office, though I dare say the both of you spent more time there than half the student body in the history of Hogwarts.” Without further ado, Severus Snape stepped from the shadows.

“Snape,” Sirius spat. “Dumbledore sent *you*?”

“Indeed he did, *Black*. Even with your pea - sized brain, I’m sure you can guess I find no pleasure in this,” he said disgustedly. Snape looked over the group. “I see you’ve had puppies, Lupin. Let us hope they don’t bite.”

Sirius growled deep in his throat. “Why you—”

“Let’s move along, shall we? I have a class in twenty minutes. Unlike some, I am actually qualified to educate others,” the potions master sneered.

Sirius opened his mouth to retort but was cut off when Horace sprung forward, standing between Hermione and the potions master. Horace, no longer a puppy but not quite full grown yet, stood protectively in front of Hermione, growling fiercely with his fur bristling, poised to attack if necessary.

“Found yourself someone who will have you, Black? It’s not hard to believe that only a dog would take you, though I dare say it says a great deal of your personality.” Snape sounded far less sure of himself. “Let’s go, then.” He turned sharply, his robes swirling and billowing behind him.

After seeing the swirling cape, the urge was too much for Horace. He launched himself forward and latched on to the seat of Snape's trousers, still growling ferociously. Sirius and Remus burst into laughter when Horace ripped part of the potions master's trousers off and was chewing on the fabric like there was no tomorrow. Harry could only watch the scene with sympathy, having once been chased up a tree by Ripper.

The laughter died quickly when Snape drew his wand. His obsidian eyes, so reminiscent of the Dark Harry's, burned with untold rage. Reflexively, Hermione, Sirius and Remus all went for their wands, but it was Harry, who had never needed a wand to do magic, who reacted first.

With an eerie sense of calm, Harry made a vague gesture with his hand, lifting Snape in the air by his ankle, much like the spell the Half - Blood Prince himself created. Harry glared coldly at the potions master as Horace began to bark and prance happily.

"You know what, Snivellus? I think I do remember the way to the headmaster's office, so it looks like we won't be needing your help after all. If you hang around," he smirked, "I will see you on the way out. Come on, then, let's go." Sirius said, ushering them towards the door.

A few steps further, the old Hermione Granger who always rooted for the underdog, turned and raised her arm before her. Concentrating, she turned him in air and lowered him to the ground so that he landed gracefully on his feet. Though she loathed the Half - Blood Prince with all of her being, she also had a healthy respect for his intellect. It helped that Dumbledore was still alive. Judging from the look he was giving her, though, she didn't think he liked her very much.

Hermione shrugged to herself. Helping him was the best thing to do. Part of her felt that, if shown enough mercy, he might redeem himself. After all, he *had* saved Harry's life while at Hogwarts. Hermione had to believe that no one was beyond redemption, that everyone could be saved—if not, then her quest to keep Harry from becoming a Dark Lord was pointless.

Once his feet were safely on the ground, Hermione continued on, ignoring Sirius' pout, and accepting Remus' approving look with a nod. "Harry," she whispered coming up beside her friend, "I wanted to say thank you, for protecting Horace."

Harry smiled in return and replied, "I wouldn't let anything happen to him. Besides, he was protecting you, wasn't he?"

Hermione smiled at him and tuned in to what Remus and Sirius were saying as they walked.

"—beautiful thing I ever saw. Just like James," Sirius said, wiping a fake tear from his eye. "Makes me want to dance the jig, knowing that Harry is so much like his father. He acts more and more like him each day. Warms the cockles of my heart, that does," he chuckled. Remus only sighed in exasperation, though Hermione could see he was amused. The werewolf turned to Harry and Hermione instead.

"Harry, while it was very good of you to protect Horace, you shouldn't have done that," he chastised gently. "Sirius or I would have protected him. And you certainly didn't need to do that to Professor Snape. He's going to be your teacher one day, and I think you should try to be polite to him. As for you, Hermione, that was a very good thing to do, letting him down."

"Ruined all of my fun though," Sirius half mumbled to himself.

Remus continued on. "Though I have to ask you, when you do wandless magic, do you always use hand gestures?"

Harry looked at Hermione and shrugged, telling her that it was up to her to explain the conclusion they had arrived at some time before. "Yes," she replied. "It makes things easier." Remus nodded while Hermione shared a look with Harry. *At least it wasn't a whole lie*, she consoled herself.

Hand gestures did make wandless magic easier— it made it easier for people who witnessed it to accept it. Early on, she had realized that it unnerved people when things randomly floated towards her, particularly at school. To make things easier for those around her, and by default for herself, she thought of using hand gestures. Not

only would it alert people that she was doing magic, it made her slightly more normal, as though she was just another witch, waving a wand in a particular pattern. It made her more easily accepted.

Harry, however, had never felt the need for hand gestures, though he did use them on occasion. He never practiced his wandless magic in front of other people, as per her request, and magical incidents surrounding him were written of as accidental magic. Sometimes the other kids said it was *her* doing the magic, though she was sure that they were only trying to get her into trouble. *Not that I need any help getting into trouble, these days. I getting to be as bad as Harry!*

"I don't suppose he told you the password by any chance, did he Moony?" Hermione's head snapped up, and sure enough, she was standing before the gargoyle that protected the entrance to Dumbledore's office.

"No, he didn't," Remus sighed. "Perhaps we should have brought Snape along with us."

Sirius snorted. "Not likely. Come on, if all four of us start shouting things at it, one of us will guess correctly eventually. Let's give it a go."

Hermione listened to the two men say random things, from "cauldron" to "staircase" to "Riddikulus". She barely suppressed a snort. Had they forgotten Dumbledore's sweet fetish?

"Cauldron cakes," she said.

"Spoon," said Sirius.

"Dog," Remus supplied.

"Pumpkin Pasty," Hermione said over Sirius and Remus.

"Got a bit of a sweet tooth, have you Hermione?" Sirius asked with an indulgent smile.

Harry, meanwhile, had cottoned on to Hermione's idea. "Pumpkin pie," he said. Lo and behold, the gargoyle hopped to the side. The

two men stood agape as Harry and Hermione shared a look and burst into laughter. Hermione took a moment to reflect on how much she enjoyed being able to have an entire conversation with Harry without even saying a word.

Sirius looked slightly offended. "He's trying to steal my favourite dessert!" He began to grumble to himself. "That's not very fair of him, taking my favourite treat and making it into a password like that."

"Well," Remus said, fighting a smile. "I guess we'd better get to it, then." With that, the group trekked up the staircase and stood behind Remus as he knocked on the door.

"Enter!" Dumbledore called from the other side. Remus opened the door for them to walk into the office. Hermione steeled herself and prayed Harry remembered everything they had gone over in their makeshift Occlumency lessons. She was thankful that there had been a spare moment the day after they had been caught when she was able to warn him that Dumbledore, while well - meaning, would probably try to see his thoughts, and that he should practice.

Hermione only hoped it worked— if Dumbledore learned of everything that she had told Harry, then there would be more trouble than she could handle. Having dealt with everything else, thus far, she wasn't sure she could handle too many more complications.

"Professor Dumbledore, sir," Sirius said, shaking the headmaster's hand.

"Please, Sirius, you and Remus are teachers as well now. I think we can dispense with the titles. Call me Albus." He glanced around the room. "I see Severus didn't join you." His words were casual.

"He decided he didn't want to hang around with us any longer, so we made the trip without him. Besides, he was on the receiving end of Horace's bite, so I think it was best, in the end. He's not very fond of our dog at the moment." Sirius said, fighting the grin that threatened to spread over his face.

"I see," Dumbledore said, somewhat blandly. "Well, have a seat so that we can talk." Everyone sat in one of the chair set before the

grand desk. "So, Sirius, Remus, to what do I owe the honour of this visit? The power dampener is still working, I trust?"

"Yes, the power dampener is working wonderfully. I don't know how to thank you enough for that." Remus said, but Dumbledore waved it away before he could offer more praise. "As for the visit, it, ah, it seems we've run into a bit of a complication."

"Oh?" Professor Dumbledore said. "And what would that be?"

"It seems that Hermione here has taught Harry how to do wandless magic," Sirius said. "We caught doing quite a bit of wandless magic in Hermione's room the other night. We wanted to come and talk to you about it, but we had a school to run, and this is the only time we had free." He sighed heavily. "We don't know what to do. We have recently found out that Hermione is a Seer, and we believe that she may be training Harry for something, but she won't tell us." He said bluntly.

Dumbledore nodded to himself, then looked over the two children before him. Hermione fought to keep herself from squirming under his intense gaze. She hated how it seemed as though he could look into her soul without even trying. She could tell he was using Legilimency on her when she felt the tickle in her mind before her magic pushed him out. *Hang it all, his eyes are just twinkling away! He thinks it's amusing that he can't get into my head! If I doubted his sanity before, now I have evidence that he's lost his marbles.* Hermione pushed her thoughts away, feeling an immediate sense of guilt.

She was pulled from her thoughts when she heard Dumbledore chuckling merrily. "Oh my, I certainly wasn't expecting that!" His eyes were twinkling madly as he glanced between Harry and Hermione. "I certainly wasn't expecting that at all, though I can't say I'm displeased. This is certainly and... *interesting*... turn of events."

"What is?" Sirius asked, his eyes shifting between the children and the headmaster.

"It would seem that our dear Hermione is quite the teacher," he chuckled again. "She has taught Harry how to do the basics of Occlumency." Sirius began to sputter while Remus made a strangled

noise. Hermione wondered if she could somehow use her wandless magic to make herself invisible. "Yes, it is wonderful, isn't it? His shields are not as strong as hers, but they are actually stronger than most grown witches and wizards can produce. Remarkable," he continued to twinkle as he turned to Hermione.

"And you taught him wandless magic, yes? What sort of things can the two of you do?" He asked, bouncing a little in his seat like a child waiting to open presents at Christmas time.

Hermione herself was taken aback. Shouldn't he hum, and stroke his beard, and mumble about being an old man before offering advice that only a fool would refuse? He looked like he had one a lifetime supply of sherbet lemons. She didn't quite know what to say. "Erm, well, we can do Occlumency," she said, unsure how to continue. "And, um, we can—"

"They can fly without broomsticks," Sirius said tightly, clearly fighting to control his temper. His fear over either of them getting hurt had brought out a stricter side of the normally playful man. Hermione forgave him— he was only trying to do as he promised Lily and James and protect their son.

"Really? I must say, that is quite fascinating. Dare I ask how you ever managed such a remarkable feat?"

Harry glanced at Hermione. *Should we tell him?* His eyes asked.

Hermione narrowed her eyes. *No, that's a bad idea. We can't tell anyone how to do wandless magic.* Silently, Hermione revelled in her ability communicate with Harry with a single glance. In the back of her mind, she wondered when their connection had become so strong.

Dumbledore was taking the time to look them over, a strange gleam in his eyes. "I see," he said. He sat quietly in his seat for a moment, simply staring at the two before he turned to Sirius and Remus. "Have you considered having them see a counsellor? I seem to recall that they have had some rather traumatic experiences."

Remus began to shift uncomfortably. "Sirius and I discussed it, but well," Hermione looked up, surprised. She certainly hadn't known

they'd been discussing her seeing a counsellor. "The kids don't really seem to need it. Strange, all things considered, but these two have adjusted better to what has happened to them better than most grown witches and wizards. We just..." He trailed off, gesturing vaguely.

"I see," Dumbledore murmured. "There is a difference in being well, and *pretending* to be well. I would suggest that they see someone who is equipped to help them deal with the things they have been witness to. I have already made a similar suggestion to Molly Weasley in reference to young Draco Malfoy." Hermione couldn't believe what she was hearing. She wrinkled her nose in distaste—she most certainly did not need a counsellor!

"Forgive me, headmaster," Sirius spoke up, "but what does counselling have to do with their practicing wandless magic? We wanted to come to you for advice on what we should do, and brought them along in case you wished to speak with them, and while your advice is sound, what does it have to do with their magic?"

"It has a great deal to do with it, Sirius. First of all, I have thought about young Hermione's wandless magic off and on for some time now, and I recalled that you said her powers were acting up all the time. While I am sure she means no harm, it is quite dangerous to have her in school, near other children because her magic could act up at any moment." Hermione sunk lower in her chair at the headmaster's words. "I feel that a great deal of it is caused by surprise, or perhaps fear, or even a strong sense of anxiety. Counselling, over time, should be able to counteract these effects. As for Harry, I dare say he could use similar treatment, judging from some... previous... conversations we have had, both in person and via owl post. Do you plan to let them continue their practicing of magic?"

"We had planned on it," Remus said slowly, as though he were weighing his options. "But we won't let them if you advise against it."

Dumbledore chuckled. "If there is anything I know of children, telling them they can't do something will only drive their desire to do just what you have told them not to do. I myself was rather rebellious in my youth," he said, a touch of wistfulness in his voice. "I think it best

for you to follow through with your original intentions, though I must ask how you did you plan on teaching them? When last I knew, wandless magic of the magnitude these two can perform is incredibly rare.”

“Well,” Sirius sighed. “For all that she’s seven years old, Hermione has the knowledge to teach most adults a thing or two or ten. We were just going to go about letting her teach him, but with at least one or both of us standing by in case they tried to do something dangerous... like flying around a room without an adult to look after them or a broomstick.” Harry and Hermione winced.

“Indeed,” Dumbledore murmured in amusement. “And when did you plan to hold these little magic learning sessions? Will others be included?”

“I don’t think we’ll be including very many people,” Remus said thoughtfully. “Hermione seems rather set on keeping the knowledge of controlling wandless magic secret. We had thought about letting them work on it on Sundays, when the school would be empty.”

Dumbledore hummed. “I see. Tell me, my dear. Why do you keep wandless magic a secret? Many people could benefit from learning it.” His eyes had a strange, serious look in them.

Hermione sat silently for a moment, wondering what he was getting at. *He’s testing me*, she realized. *Think fast, Granger!* “I...” she hesitated. “I think that there are a lot of bad people,” she thought of Lucius Malfoy. “And I think there are a lot of people who mean well, but don’t always do things the way they should,” she thought of Hagrid. “I don’t want the bad people to know how to do magic the way I do, but that makes them even more dangerous, and I don’t want other people to know, because they might tell one of the bad people.” *Could I sound any more infantile?*

The headmaster smiled slightly and nodded. Hermione decided to take a risk and push her mind towards his, seeking his emotions with her weak at best Legilimency. There she found a sense of satisfaction mixed with relief and... amusement? *He’s looking at me! He knows what I’m going!* Panicked, she lowered her eyes, staring intently at the floor and heard him laugh softly.

“Well, I dare say that is an excellent answer. I agree completely.” He looked back at Sirius and Remus. “As for their training in the use of magic, I would suggest that you keep a close watch on what they do and try to help them along in any way you can.” Dumbledore said, turning to the two older men. “It would be in your best interest to find a room and place several wards on it to aid in protecting the children.”

“Are you sure it’s wise to let them learn this sort of thing?” Sirius asked. “I mean, they are only children.”

“For being ‘only children’, Sirius, I would have to say that they have done more than most adults. If, as you believe, Hermione is a Seer and that she is training Harry for some purpose unknown to us, then I think it best that we not stand in her way.” His eyes took on a distant look, and Hermione realized he was thinking about the prophecy. Sirius and Remus wouldn’t know it, but Dumbledore certainly did. To his way of thinking, Hermione was probably lightening *his* burden by training Harry so young.

“True,” Sirius reluctantly agreed. He sighed heavily, clearly not wanting them to practice their wandless magic. “But it seems to me that, being kids, it isn’t really fair to them, that they spend so much time practicing magic instead of being, well, kids.”

“I like it,” Harry said quietly, speaking for the first time. “I want to practice, because sometimes my magic acts up, and I don’t want to hurt anyone on accident. And Hermione and I have a lot of fun doing magic, like the game we were playing before, when we were learning how to make ourselves move faster.”

Dumbledore perked up a bit. “Really? Would the two of you be willing to demonstrate flying for me? I think that between myself and your guardians—”

“Fathers,” Remus interjected. Dumbledore raised his eyebrows. “Sirius adopted Harry and I adopted the girls.” He explained.

“Ah! So you would be Harry Black and Hermione Lupin, then?” Dumbledore asked cheerfully.

“Actually,” Sirius said, “Harry is still Harry Potter. We didn’t want to change his name all things considered, and the girls are Granger - Lupin’s now. But now no one can take them from us at the drop of a hat.”

“Wonderful!” The headmaster grinned. “Now, about that demonstration?” He looked at Harry and Hermione while Sirius and Remus shifted uncomfortably in their seats.

Deciding that it was pointless not to, and that considering the way the conversation had been going, she thought they might as well. At the very least, it would be a little bit of practice. Giving Harry a look, they shrugged and stood before lifting themselves into the air with their magic.

“Remarkable!” Dumbledore breathed. “Amazing how they do it so effortlessly.” He looked at them in awe. “Here,” he grabbed a small sack filled with sherbet lemons and handing it to Hermione. “Perhaps you would toss this around?”

Not really sure what the point was, Hermione tossed the bag to Harry who pitched it back. They continued on until Harry accidentally threw the bag too far to the left. Hermione quickly snagged it, nearly losing her balance in the process. Hearing Harry snicker, she decided it was time for a bit of payback and tossed the bag to his right, making him dive for it. After that, it was all out war.

They threw the sack behind the adults, threw it high into the air, threw it close to the ground, faked throwing it right then tossed it left. It was a never ending cycle of trying to trick the other. Much as they had the last time they were playing, they got lost in their game. They never bothered to look at the adults, who were marvelling that the two were more graceful in the air than they were on the ground. Even Hermione, who no one could get on a broom.

It wasn’t until Harry tossed the bag behind him that the game ended. Harry had been hovering just behind the chair Sirius was sitting in while Hermione was floating behind Professor Dumbledore, so when he threw the bag behind him, Hermione had to swerve around everyone and fly right at the door to catch it. Just as Minerva McGonagall stepped into the room.

"What in the name of— that's not— I don't..." She trailed off, staring at Hermione as she hovered in midair. "I need a drink." Hermione could understand her former mentor's trouble— it was unheard of to see children flying under their own willpower and without a broom.

"Minerva, I would like you to meet Harry Potter and Hermione Granger - Lupin. It would seem they can do wandless magic," he said jovially. "Isn't this wonderful?"

"Albus," she said faintly, her eyes shifting to Harry, who also hung in the air. "Poppy needs to see you about the potions stores. I guess Severus is snarling and snapping and not brewing."

"What's new?" Sirius deadpanned.

"There are children floating in your office, Albus, don't you think you should do something about that?" Minerva said instead.

The wizened wizard chuckled delightedly. "Is that all you have to say, Minerva? These two will be your students in a few years. Do you not agree that they have achieved a remarkable feat?"

"Oh, it's remarkable alright. You had better pray that no one from the *Daily Prophet* finds out about it." She looked sick. "Or they will never have any peace. Honestly, having children fly around like this, and without broomsticks!" She seemed to have snapped out of her shocked state and transformed in the mother lioness Hermione recognized from her time at Hogwarts.

"Honestly Albus, they could have gotten hurt, flying around like that. And you!" She turned on Sirius and Remus, who cowered before her. "You *let* them fly around like that, knowing full well that they could have lost control, or could have flown too fast, and could have flown right into one of the *many* sharp items within the room!"

Harry and Hermione discretely lowered themselves to the ground, hoping they wouldn't be seen.

"What am I to do with you?" McGonagall clucked. The men looked properly chastised. Dumbledore looked like she had taken away his favourite toy. "And worse, now you're going to have to find a way to

train the two of them in their magic, lest they go off and blow someone up!"

Harry and Hermione quietly slipped into their seats as McGonagall continued her tirade.

"Well?" She demanded.

Sirius swallowed thickly. "Well, what?"

"*Well*," she growled through her Scottish brogue. "How do you plan to go about teaching these children to control their *remarkable* powers? It's too dangerous to let them run about unchecked!"

Sirius, Remus and the headmaster shared a sheepish look before Dumbledore spoke. "We thought we would let them teach themselves?" He offered.

"Men!" She made a strangled noise. "We'll see about that!" She huffed. "Merlin's beard, Albus, what were you thinking? Letting them teach themselves! Ha!" Hermione fought to keep herself from chuckling, relieved that *she* wasn't on the receiving end of professor McGonagall's wrath.

Dumbledore flushed an amusing shade of red. "Well, we had thought that they were doing a wonderful job on their own..." he defended. "And we thought that we really should leave it up to young Miss Granger - Lupin, seeing as she is the only one who can really control wandless magic." They were silent before he sighed. "As you wish. I was caught up in the moment of seeing children flying under their own power, and I wanted to know how much they could learn on their own." He admitted bashfully.

"You wanted to use our kids as test subjects?" Remus said, shocked.

"Test subject isn't quite the term I would use, my good Remus. It would have been more of a child study." Dumbledore said earnestly.

McGonagall snorted. "Firstly, you will need to test the two of them to figure out just what they are capable of. After that, you need to discern their strengths and their weaknesses and find a way to build

up their weak areas without neglecting their strong points. Once that has been decided, you'll need to decide what would benefit them most to learn. I would recommend..."

And so it went. The deputy headmistress set about deciding what Sirius and Remus needed to do to help Harry and Hermione learn to control their wandless magic, even going so far as to write out a lesson plan.

Hermione sighed. *So much for secret lessons.*

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A/N: I'm so sorry that this is so late, but I wanted to finish "Home" first, and then I wanted to write an essay about the final Horcrux. I've posted it on Portkey, but I guess it has to go through to Mods first, so I don't know when I'll be seeing it on the forums.

Shortly after that, my mother had an accident and did something to her back, so I've been helping her a great deal. Regrettably, until my mother is better, updates on this story will be few and far between, though I will update as soon as I can. Look on the bright side: some authors take months to write a chapter, and I have never made anyone wait that long. Hopefully my mother will be well soon, and this little note will prove to be unnecessary.

Regardless, I would like to thank everyone who read last time, with special thanks to those who reviewed. As always, please read and review.

Cheers,

Madm05

Chapter Fifteen: Marauders

Hermione couldn't stop the laughter that bubbled up inside of her, nor did she want to. She was perched on Remus' shoulders, watching the Yule dance in the middle of Diagon Alley. Harry was likewise sitting on Sirius' shoulders while Harmony giggled merrily in Tonks' arms. Minister Crouch had decided to bring back an ages old tradition, long since forgotten— the Yule Festival.

It had been nearly three months since her visit with the good headmaster, and now she was enjoying the Christmas season along with the rest of her family, glad that school had let out a little more than a week ago. It was hard to believe that time could move so quickly, especially considering that school was so dreadfully boring. Normally she considered anything to do with an education riveting, but now she just wanted to bang her head on her desk, especially since her acting lessons she attended every Friday morning proved that there were fence posts with more talent than her. Hermione felt that if she had to hear Mr. Valentino say “No, Hermione! *Feel* the emozione!” she was going to pull out her hair.

Her acting abilities were fantastic compared to her drawing abilities. It turned out that her picture of Crookshanks was the best picture she had managed to draw yet. It wasn't that she didn't like art, because she did— she adored museums. It was just that she wasn't very good at it. That and it simply wasn't logical to her. Mathematics she understood. Things like Hatching and Stumping, she did not. It frustrated her to no end.

The only thing that appealed to her was the idea of learning new languages and music. Hermione winced. Her mother had always said that music was another language. She pushed the thought aside. Well, learning and spending time with Harry were still good things in her life. Nothing cheered her up more than seeing Harry excel in something.

It turned out that Harry had ear for music, as Ted Tonks discovered he was very talented at the piano. Hermione herself was already well accomplished with the piano, as she had been given lessons since she was seven in the other timeline, but she quickly decided she was

nowhere near Harry in the area of raw talent. Harry was a natural—she still hadn't managed to master the finer points of the piano that came naturally to Harry. Sometimes she would even play accompaniment with him, though her music was not nearly as moving as his— at the piano, at least.

Lately she had taken to the bittersweet sounds of the violin. She had quickly fallen in love with the music she could create. Playing the violin was also her sole artistic talent. What she lacked in acting and anything else even remotely artistic, she more than made up for with her beloved violin— a gift from Remus when she told him she was interested in learning to play. She had found that the violin was to her, what the piano was to Harry.

Both had found a sort of release in playing. Often times, the two of them would play by ear, not knowing the notes, but they would always play together and together they would create beautiful music. There was no way to describe just how they managed to play for themselves, and still have their music create perfect Harmony with the other. What they played varied day - to - day, and was usually determined by what they felt. Depending on their mood, they could play a jaunty little tune, or a mournful melody.

No two pieces were ever the same, and they could never really remember what they played, but after the first few times, Sirius and Remus had taken to setting up recording spells. The two men had considered just having the two of them quite their music lessons and just letting them learn on their own, but decided that the pair needed structure, and that learning the technicalities of music would be to their benefit.

Their magic lessons, of course, were progressing much better for Hermione, and were much more stimulating for her than the alphabet. More often than not, they ended up flying without broomsticks, since Sirius and Remus completely broke away from the lesson plans McGonagall had written up. It was partially to ease Sirius' mind, partially to gain further control over their movements and speed, and partially because it was enjoyable for the spectators to see such a sight. It wasn't until an incident involving Malfoy that Sirius and Remus decided to focus on other forms of magic.

The young Malfoy, despite his new home and new way of life, was very like his counterpart from Hermione's timeline. When Hermione, who had not been paying the least bit of attention to Remus' lesson on making the 'ch' sound, answered a question correctly, she had somehow angered Draco. He had waited until Remus' back was turned before throwing some sort of dung bomb that he had managed to get hold of— one that exploded on contact— into her hair. It had taken a great deal of fancy wand work to get the smell out later, and Hermione truly thought she would never be able to live through the humiliation.

In the split second it had taken Remus to turn around, however, Harry had retaliated on her behalf. Draco's robes had burst into emerald flames. In an attempt to protect his student, the werewolf had doused Draco with conjured water, only to find that Harry's emerald flames were waterproof. It was one of Hermione's prouder moments, seeing Harry use one of the techniques she had taught him. It wasn't portable, like her bluebell flames, but it was a step in the right direction. Of course, she would have rather he had not attacked Malfoy, but then, he was only defending her, as he later told Remus and Sirius.

That little incident had been the deciding factor in many things. The following day, Sirius and Remus had set up appointments for the both of them to meet with a counsellor and began a more rigorous course of learning for them, one that involved relaxation techniques and ways to control emotions, anger in particular. Oddly, Hermione had never felt more in control of her powers before, even when she could use her beloved wand.

The counselling sessions were not as horrible as she believed they would be either. The first session had gone nowhere fast, but over time, Hermione began to see the merits of discussing some of her smaller problems. Ironically, it was only when she professed to hating lying that things began to turn in her favour. As it turned out, wizarding counsellors were not required to take an oath of secrecy, and were able to, and did, speak with others concerned, so long as the matter being discussed did not totally violate the patient's privacy. In this case, her hatred of lying was considered fair game for conversation material with her guardian.

At first, Hermione had been angry when the counsellor, Madame Alfreda, had spoken with Sirius and Remus about what was said in their sessions— until she found that Sirius and Remus stopped asking her so many questions about how she knew the things she did. They had stopped *forcing* her to lie. It was like having a weight lifted from her shoulders, knowing that she wouldn't have to lie to Remus or Sirius.

Sometimes Hermione wished she could tell Madame Alfreda how she had come to be in her present situation, but a voice in the back of her mind reminded her of the rules she had to follow, and so she said nothing of being sent from a dark future to keep Harry from becoming the next Dark Lord, lest she be locked up in St. Mungo's.

Harry was in counselling, just as she was. Though he was reluctant to speak up, Hermione could tell that he was working through his belief that he was inferior, and was finally coming to understand that Aunts and Uncles were not supposed to make their nephews sleep in the cupboard under the stairs. Hermione felt that she would always regret that he couldn't share many of his problems with her, but knew there was little she could do— she couldn't very well share her burdens with him, either. Some ghosts, she had decided, simply weren't meant to be shared, even with those you loved. Both had come to accept that friends had secrets, even from friends. In the time that had passed, both had grown— and healed— a great deal. It was almost as if the skies had cleared and the sun was shining down on them.

Then there was Harmony's birthday that had passed in mid November, Hermione remembered with a smile. In true Harmony fashion, the one year old had torn the paper off her gifts, shoved her gifts to the side and promptly began to play with the paper. It was made all the more fascinating by the moving design. It was also on that particularly momentous occasion that Harmony said her new favourite phrase for the first time when Sirius took the wrapping paper away from her. "Bad Dog!" Sirius didn't think it was very amusing, while everyone else thought it was hilarious.

And at that moment, sitting on Remus' shoulders, watching older witches and wizards dance, Hermione wished she could slow time. It

was a cold, crisp Saturday evening, but it wasn't enough to drive even the frailest of witches and wizards indoors. It was, Hermione felt, pleasant, considering it was winter and she had always preferred the warmer temperatures.

The pathways of Diagon Alley were framed with moving snow - families and small snowball fights between the other children. Harry and Hermione had decided not to get involved in any of that and chose to stay with their fathers and watch the shows.

"Hey Moony, what do you say we head over and watch one of the plays? I'm getting dizzy watching these people whirl around and around. Let's do something else for awhile," Sirius said, a plaintive note in his voice.

Remus chuckled. "Well, I don't see why not. Although," he paused, "I don't really feel up for any of the plays. Is there anything else you would rather do?"

Harry leaned down and whispered something into Sirius' ear. "Ah, I think Harry and I will go see one of the plays anyways, alright Moony? You wouldn't mind splitting up would you?"

"No, not at all. You two go on ahead," Remus nodded. He watched as Harry and his godfather walked away before he laughed again. "Well, you were right, Hermione. They did get bored watching the dancing and leave us pretty quick. So, where did you want to go first to do your Christmas shopping?"

Hermione grinned. "Let's go to the toy store, so that I can get something for Harry and Harmony. Who knows," she giggled. "Maybe I'll find something for Uncle Sirius, too."

Tonks grinned at them and shook her head. "I'll stay here with Harmony in case Sirius comes back while you two shop. If they ask, I'll say you decided to wander around for a bit."

"Thanks, Dora," Remus smiled. "You're a life saver." With that, he lifted Hermione off his shoulders and set her on the ground. "Be careful, Hermione, it's really icy over here. Hold onto my hand."

Hermione smiled softly and grabbed his hand, a sense of comfort washing over her. It was nice, she decided, to have Remus as a father. He knew a great deal about hardships and secrets, and seemed to understand her better than she would have thought possible. She realized, with a small pang in her heart, that Remus understood her better than her own father had in life. In fact, she felt that everyone she lived with now understood her better than her parents had. She pushed the thought out of her mind, deciding to enjoy that fact that she was with people who understood and accepted her for who she was rather than brood over the lost opportunities with her parents.

“Well,” Remus said, interrupting her thoughts. “This looks like a good place to start, don’t you think?”

She looked up at the sign overhead. *Silly Sprites: Toys for Tots and Much Much More*. Glancing at the window, Hermione saw a dancing puppet. “Yes,” she agreed with a nod. “I think this will be a good place to begin.”

Entering the store, Hermione was taken aback by the sheer number of toys in the room. Combined with the absurd number of people out for the Yule Festival and for holiday shopping, Hermione felt overwhelmed. The toy store was a far cry from the bookstores she preferred, and made even the wildest of Hogsmeade weekends seem tame.

“Um,” Hermione cringed when an elderly witch began shrieking about some brat running off with the toy she was going to buy for her grandson. “I think we should try somewhere else first.”

Remus winced when a little boy started screaming and throwing a tantrum. “Yes, I think that would be a good idea.” He grasped her hand a little tighter. “Let’s go,” Remus said, moving back towards the door.

Hermione kept in step with her adopted father, all too happy to leave the hectic store. Either she would have to buy something else for Harry and Harmony, or she would have to come back later. Rather than ponder where Remus was taking her, she began to consider just

what she was going to get for everyone. Her adopted father, in particular, was going to be tricky.

The pair weaved their way through the busy streets of Diagon Alley, staying close so as not to lose each other. Many people would stare as they passed, looking at the werewolf and his adopted daughter, the Wandless Witch, but Hermione and Remus tactfully chose to ignore them. After a brief walk, Remus led her into another, much smaller and much quieter store. It was a jewellery department.

“I, uh,” he coughed lightly. “There was something I wanted to look at here. It’s small, so I think you can look around. Just don’t go too far.”

Hermione smiled and nodded before leaving him to his task. Doubtless, he was looking for something to give to Tonks. Suppressing a laugh, she wandered off, looking at the things for sale. Most of them were outrageously priced, and hideous to look at, but there were some pieces that looked like they were worth every galleon they cost.

Her wandering led her towards the back of the store, though she was careful to keep Remus in sight at all times. She had been looking at a particularly frightening necklace in the shape of a striking snake when by chance she looked up and noticed a rather dusty looking glass case.

Hermione blew on the casing, scattering dust everywhere, but clearing her view a little. Inside the case was what appeared to be a coin of some sort. Intrigued, she wiped the dust away and looked through the glass, only to find that the coin was, in fact, a medallion, hanging from a thin, rusted looking chain. The medallion itself was no prize to look at. It was worn, likely from being handled, and the image was faded, but appeared to be either a setting or rising sun, set between two mountains.

“The Discipline Pendant,” a voice rasped beside her.

Hermione jumped, startled at the stillness broken and looked frantically around. Behind the case, in the shadows, a figure stood. “W-w—” Hermione cleared her throat and willed her heartbeat to slow. “I’m sorry, what?”

The figure stepped out from the corner to reveal a frightening looking woman. She was grim and gaunt, with an eye patch over her left eye, and a long, crooked nose. Strangely, her frightening appearance was offset by a mischievous sparkle in her eye. "It's called the Discipline Pendant. When it is given as a gift from the heart, it is believed to strengthen the receiver's mind. It doesn't always work, though. In fact, it usually doesn't work, since nowadays most people don't give gifts from the heart. Nowadays, people give gifts so that they can get gifts back, don't they?"

"What does it do, exactly?" Hermione asked, looking again at the medallion.

The woman shrugged. "Like I said, it strengthens the mind of the receiver, providing it works at all. It is rumoured that it once belonged to Sylvester Mulitplicus, and allowed him to be the first and only wizard to achieve more than one animagus form—he had five forms, and he attributed his ability to the Discipline Pendant."

"How much?" Hermione asked softly, half - afraid of the price of this artefact.

"Oh, I think nine galleons would be fair," the woman replied.

"So little?" Hermione asked, her brow furrowed.

The woman gave her a penetrating look. "Yes, nine galleons. As I said, it is hard to come across one who would give such a gift to another without expecting anything in return. It is only valuable to one who has another who truly loves them, and they are few and far between. I certainly don't have a use for it, so I might as well sell it someone who'll give it to someone who could use it... provided you're not going to keep it yourself. It only works if it's given as a gift, you know."

"Yes, I know," Hermione said, someone agitated. "Can you prove that this is the actual Discipline Pendant?" She asked. The woman looked at her shrewdly before nodding.

"The Pendant was made so long ago that it has somehow developed a resistance to magic. Watch," the woman commanded before

moving her wand in the 'swish and flick' pattern and intoned, "Wingardium Leviosa!" The medallion didn't move. Not believing the woman was really casting magic, Hermione tried to lift it with her magic, but failed. It truly was resistant to magic.

"I'll buy it," Hermione said, taking nine galleons out of the small bag hanging at her side. It was most of her allowance, but she decided that the medallion, if it worked, would be worth it. Besides, even if it didn't work, she wanted a chance to study it further. "I'd like a receipt, if you please," Hermione said as the woman handed her the Discipline Pendant.

The woman laughed again. "I guess you *do* have a mind underneath all that hair!" The old woman fiddled around with a bit of parchment before handing it to Hermione.

Ever cautious of what she was buying, Hermione checked to be sure that the receipt was accurate. Satisfied that everything was as it should be, Hermione carefully tucked the parchment and the medallion into her money pouch. "Good day, Madame," Hermione said with a small curtsy before she turned back towards Remus, who seemed to be arguing with a man that could have been the old woman's twin.

When at last she reached Remus, he seemed to be beyond exasperated. "Fine," he growled slamming several galleons on the counter in front of the other man. "There. Now, can I have the necklace?" The smug man smiled and handed a small box over. "Good day!" He said sharply. "Come along Hermione, I think it's time we moved on to another store."

Hermione nodded, all too ready to leave the store and go somewhere else— the owners were more than a bit off - putting. Just as they were about to venture down the street, they ran into an, unfortunately, familiar face.

Dolores Umbridge looked at them and gave a sickly sweet smile. "Why, hello there," she cooed at Remus. "I never thought I'd see you here. Not exactly a... wholesome... place. I can't help but wonder why you would bring such a sweet little girl like this," Umbridge gestured vaguely to Hermione. "To such a place. Not involved in

anything dodgy, are you? I know that a great many things they sell in the establishment you just left are less than... how shall I say this... pleasant."

"Certainly not, madam," Remus replied casually. "My *daughter* and I were just doing a bit a Christmas shopping. To my knowledge, this establishment has never sold anything that could be considered unsavoury."

Umbridge sniffed. "*Daughter?* As in only one? Where is the other, I do believe you were given custody over two children. Did you feed the infant to the wolves?" She asked, her voice like honey laced with venom.

The werewolf gritted his teeth. "I assure you that my other daughter is safe and sound, as well as far away from any who would harm her. She is currently being watched by a friend while I take Hermione around."

Umbridge smiled thinly and changed the topic. "The owner of this... establishment... is the descendant of a Banshee. That makes anything sold here unsavoury. The owner is a half - breed."

Remus stiffened noticeably. Hermione saw Umbridge's eyes glittering in triumph and bristled. "Are *you* a half - breed, then? You certainly *look* like you're the descendant of a toad."

Umbridge made a face, clearly trying to scowl frighteningly, but looked like she was sucking on a lemon instead. Hermione glared defiantly back, remembering everything this woman had ever done to cause her trouble, and hating her more and more with each passing moment.

"Well," Remus cleared his throat, clearly fighting a smile. "I think it best that Hermione and I continue on with our shopping. Good day, Ms. Umbridge." He gripped Hermione's hand tightly and led her away.

Once they were far and away from Umbridge, Remus allowed himself to chuckle. "Hermione," he laughed. "Not that I don't appreciate your brave defence of my honour, but did you have to do that? She can be

a very dangerous woman. She holds a great deal of power at the Ministry.”

Hermione heaved a sigh. “I’m sorry, Papa Remus. She made me very angry and I’m afraid I let my temper get the better of me.” *That toad is lucky I didn’t take a page out of the Dark Harry’s book and—* Hermione cut off that train of thought and chastised herself. *Silly girl, you shouldn’t even think about things like that. That was absolutely horrible of you. Bad bookworm!*

Remus, meanwhile, simply laughed. “Truthfully Hermione, I’m glad at how well you were able to control yourself. It would have been very easy for you to use your magic on her, but you didn’t. That makes you a very good person.”

The young witch winced, remembering her earlier thoughts. “So,” she began, desperate to get the topic of conversation away from anything even remotely related to Umbridge. “Where are we going next?”

“I think we should try another toy store, but one that’s not as... hectic. I know a place we go look at. It’s small, and you won’t find a lot of the newer toys out or anything like that, but we can try it if you would like. I know you want to get something for Harmony and Harry.”

Hermione nodded her agreement. Harmony was a baby and could amuse herself with a piece of string if given half a chance, so a small toy selection wasn’t going to be a problem there. Harry had been so deprived of anything that could bring him joy that finding him something he would like wouldn’t be that difficult either, though she truly wanted to get him something special if she could. Remus, she gently patted the coin purse at her side, was already taken care of. Hopefully the Discipline Pendant would offer him some sort of control while he was in his werewolf form. As for Sirius, she couldn’t think of anything for him.

Walking into the small shop, Hermione immediately felt at ease. There was a rather pleasant and welcoming air about the place, one that made her feel like the storeowner would come around the corner and say, “Why Hermione, I haven’t seen you in ages!” It wasn’t possible, of course— she had never been here before, but that was the feel of the place.

"Why Remus," a woman standing up from behind the counter. "I haven't seen you in ages! How are you, old friend? Oh! And who would this little darling be?"

Smiling, Remus replied, "Helena, this is Hermione, she's my daughter, and I'm quite well. Just taking Hermione around to do some shopping. Hermione, this is Helena, we went to school together at Hogwarts."

"Yes, I read all about that in the *Prophet*," Helena nodded. "I was glad to hear Sirius was innocent, though I have to say I never pegged you for the type to take in little girls that you didn't know though. It always seemed like something the Weasleys would do. How is the other one by the way? What's her name?"

Hermione gritted her teeth. "Harmony," she replied stiffly. *Honestly, what is wrong with people? Harmony is a lot easier to say than Hermione is anyways! Why can't anyone ever remember my sister, or even my parents? Is this how Harry felt every time someone said something about him or his scar and ignored the wonderful things his parents did?*

"Well, Hermione," Remus interrupted her thoughts, seeming to understand her misgivings. "Why don't you wander around for a bit and let me know if you see anything you like. Remember, you only have twenty five galleons to spend."

Hermione almost corrected him and said that she only had sixteen, but remembered that he didn't know about her purchase. Instead she bobbed her head obediently and began to wonder about the store.

Remus had been right, there wasn't a great deal there to buy. The store appeared to be more of a house with everything inside for sale. Hermione wove her way through the furniture and set out looking for toys to buy. It was purely on accident that Hermione stumbled on a painting that would be the perfect gift for Sirius. It was almost as if it had been painted with him in mind.

It was a landscape, but there was an unusual menagerie of animals painted in the picture. There was a black dog, sniffing the ground that stood beside a proud stag, alongside a werewolf. Better, there was no rat in sight. Hermione looked at the tag to read the title of the

piece. *Midnight Marauders. How appropriate.* It was priced fairly, too. It was only six galleons and seven sickles.

Making a mental note so that she could come back to it, Hermione began to wander around again, until she found the toys she was looking for. Sitting in the corner was a collection of stuffed animals, perfect for a one year old like Harmony. She was at the point in her life where throwing things was fun, and not something she did to people she didn't like. Her aim was as good as it ever was, if not better, and Hermione felt it would be best for everyone if she got Harmony something soft for Christmas.

Finding the right toy for her sister proved to be harder than she had originally thought it would be. Harmony had never really cared for girly toys in the first timeline, and Hermione assumed that this Harmony would be no different. As such, the many stuffed unicorns and pink kittens that pranced around were useless to her. She was about to give up when she chanced upon toy lion that acted much like a puppy. It would run, pounce, and growl playfully. Harmony would love it. *Besides*, she thought with a touch of mischief. *It's never too early to start teaching her how to be a Gryffindor, whether she's going to be a witch and go to Hogwarts or not.*

The price was more than fair, considering her limited spending allowance— one galleon and four sickles. That left her with eight galleons and six sickles. She could work with that easily enough, since she only had Harry to buy for yet. Hermione continued her hunt, satisfied with what she had accomplished in so little time.

Normally she wouldn't have dared to leave and try to shop without a list, but her circumstances had proven that impossible. Twenty five galleons wasn't nearly as much as she was used to having to spend, nor was she used to buying things for small children, especially since she was so limited in what she could buy. In true adult fashion, Sirius and Remus had refused to tell her what they got Harry, saying that she would tell him. So on top of limited spending, limited toy selection— especially in light of everything he had gotten for his birthday— she also had to deal with the wild card that was Sirius', Remus' and the Tonks' gifts for him.

It was while she was rummaging through the rest of the toys that she saw the perfect gift for Harry. It was a stuffed deer, but looked a great deal like a stag. In truth, it was a great deal like Harmony's lion, but while Harmony's lion held no symbolic meaning, *this* toy did. Sirius and Remus had made no secret that James' animagus form was a stag, and this magical toy would obediently follow Harry around and play with him. It, like the lion, was one galleon and four sickles. That left her a great deal of her original allowance.

Now for Tonks, she thought. It didn't take long to find something for the metamorphmagus after wondering around the store. She found a neon green bracelet priced at two galleons that was positively tacky. Tonks would love it. *And she'll never have to worry about it matching her hair*, she thought with amusement.

Hermione snatched the bracelet and returned to the counter. "—I told him he couldn't have it, of course," Helena was saying just as she saw the little girl approach. "Oh, get everything you wanted did you?"

"Actually, there was something else that I wanted, but I couldn't reach it." Hermione said.

Helena nodded. "Well, why don't just show me where it is, and we'll get your purchases tallied up, shall we?" The woman stepped away from the counter and followed Hermione to the portrait. "You want this, do you? That's funny. My sister painted it while she was in Hogwarts. She swears she saw a werewolf, a stag and a dog prancing around the grounds. She thought she saw a rat too, but from so far away she couldn't be sure, so she didn't put it in."

Hermione swallowed excitedly. This would be a truly wonderful gift for Sirius, and even for Remus, since they shared Grimmauld Place. She bounced excitedly.

"Would you like me to wrap the gifts before you go? It will only cost an extra galleon," Helena offered.

"That would be wonderful, um, could you possibly wrap this as well?" Hermione asked, drawing the Discipline Pendant from her money pouch.

"Of course. It's small enough, so it won't cost you extra." Helena did a quick tally. "Your total comes to eleven galleons and fifteen sickles." Hermione quickly handed the woman twelve galleons and received two sickles in return. Helena made quick work of the gifts, wrapping them with practiced ease, then shrinking them for good measure. "You just stick these in your pocket and have Remus put them back to normal when you get home, okay?" Hermione nodded. "There you go," she said, walking Hermione back to Remus.

The werewolf smiled. "Are you ready to go?" The young witch smiled and nodded, pleased that she was finished and that she had gotten something for everyone that would be meaningful in one way or another. For Remus, she had gotten him something that may well help him keep his mind when he transformed. It would be very important to him, she knew, because he hated relying on the potion to keep him sane, and more, he hated relying on Sirius getting the potion for him. For Sirius, the portrait would be the return of happier times, without the unpleasant reminder of Wormtail's betrayal.

The toys were of a very different type of importance for Harry and Harmony. For them it would be a return to youthful innocence, something both had been sorely lacking, Harry especially. Not only that, but the lion was a connection to Harmony's fierce personality, and the stag was a connection to Harry's family.

"Maybe I'll see you around, Helena. Until then," he gave a small wave and grabbed Hermione's hand. "Let's go, Owlet," he said.

"Owlet?" Hermione asked. She had never had a nickname before. Her parents, though loving, had always felt that nicknames were trite, and never cared for them. As such, neither she nor Harmony had ever gone by anything other than their names.

Remus looked a little nervous. "Yes," he said softly. "I just thought that, well, you're such a smart girl, and owls have always been believed to be intelligent creatures, and since owlets are young owls, I thought it was fitting if you don't want me to—"

"It's okay," Hermione replied with a small smile. "I like it." It was the truth. She did like the nickname, and she liked having a nickname

even more. It made her feel like she was truly becoming part of the family.

Chapter Sixteen: Giving

Hermione looked out the window, watching the snow fall and sipping her cocoa. *This would be a perfect Christmas Eve*, she thought. Indeed, the snowflakes were dancing in the wind, swirling about and glistening in the lamplight. Alas, it was the twenty third of December and not the twenty fourth. She was only relieved that she had finished her Christmas shopping the day before, even going so far as to get Horace a bone and Romulus some treats with her extra money.

“Sirius,” Harry said suddenly from his place in front of the fire. “How’s come I never got a present from Santa when I was with Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon, but Dudley gets lots of presents?” Harry asked, his brows furrowed in thought.

Sirius and Remus looked at each other, panicked. Obviously, the two men had gotten carried away with spirit of Christmas, and had completely forgotten that this would be the first Christmas he remembered where he would actually be getting presents.

Hermione decided to step in and tell Harry what her parents had always told her on Christmas. “Harry, Santa is only bring us one present because of how fortunate we are,” she began. Harry gave her a strange look. *Oh, right. I guess we don’t seem that fortunate, considering that our parents were murdered along with every thing else. I suppose I’d better explain.*

The young witch walked back to Harry and sat down beside him. “Santa Claus only brings lots presents to children who need them. You see, there are lots of children in the world, and a lot of kids don’t have any family at all. With so many kids, Santa can’t bring a whole bunch of toys to all of us. So what he does, is he only brings one toy to children who have families that take care of them, to tell them that he knows they’ve been good. That way, he can bring more toys to kids who don’t have anyone who will get them Christmas presents.”

Sirius and Remus shared a look and nodded to each other, while Harry looked thoughtful. “But, then, why didn’t I ever get a present when I was with Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon? Did he forget me? And why did Dudley get a whole bunch of presents?” Sirius and

Remus seemed to hold their breath as they waited to hear what Hermione would say.

Hermione frowned. "Well, Santa only brings presents to good boys and girls, and Dudley wasn't very good. I don't think Santa ever brought him anything. I think his mum and dad lied, and bought him a lot of toys, and said that they were from Santa." Hermione bit her lip. "And I don't think Santa forgot you, Harry. Maybe you're aunt and uncle never told Santa that you were staying with them," she answered lamely, running out of ideas.

Harry nodded and seemed to accept her answer, and she breathed a silent sigh of relief. "I want to help him," Harry said suddenly.

"What?" Sirius asked.

"I want to help Santa give presents to kids who don't have a Papa Sirius and an Uncle Remus," Harry replied.

Remus took on a thoughtful look. "That," he began slowly. "Is a good idea." His eyes lit up and he looked at Sirius. "I understand he visits a nearby orphanage every year, but he's so busy, he usually has to visit on Christmas Eve. I'm sure that Santa would love to have an extra helper give out presents this year. Maybe we could even help out a bit, Padfoot, what do you say?"

Sirius seemed to catch on to what Remus was implying. "I think he'd love the help, Moony. What about you Hermione, would you be willing to help give out presents this year?"

"Of course," she replied. Hermione's thoughts began to race as she tried to figure out what they were talking about. She knew that there were charity organizations that helped get orphans a gift at Christmas time, but she was sure that there wasn't an annual visit from Santa. What were they playing at?

While Remus began scribbling a note, Sirius began talking again. "Well, what do you say we have some biscuits and head off to bed?" Harmony gurgled her agreement while Harry nodded excitedly. Hermione just smiled in agreement. In truth, she always felt a bit

guilty for eating so many sweets, knowing her parents wouldn't have approved.

The two men occasionally shared a whisper, but other than that everything passed as a normal night. At nine o'clock sharp, Sirius pulled out a small book and read a story while Remus read the message Romulus had returned with. Once the story was over, Remus put Harmony to bed before tucking Hermione in, giving her a kiss on the forehead and bidding her goodnight while Sirius did the same for Harry down the hall.

She frowned, feeling that Remus had been oddly rushed in putting her to bed. Shrugging it off, she lay back and stared at her empty ceiling, trying to ignore the near empty room around her. As was her habit, Hermione cleared her mind before drifting off to sleep. Of course, it didn't stave off her dreams of the Dark Harry, but she always felt better knowing she was practicing Occlumency.

Hermione awoke the following morning to a great deal of clatter in the kitchen. Rubbing the sleep from her eyes, she pulled on her housecoat and her slippers and padded down the hallway. She was shocked at what she found.

Toys. Muggle toys. They were scattered all around the kitchen, sitting on the table and the counters. There were wrapped packages already stacked up in the corner of the room where Harmony's playpen was usually set up. "Who was it that wanted a fire truck again, Moony?" Sirius asked as he put a nametag on a rectangular box wrapped in green.

Remus looked at a long scroll. "There were three boys; Michael Thompson, Joseph Bear, and Damon Johnson," he replied. "We did get three trucks, didn't we?"

Sirius looked around. "Ah, yep! We have three. Can I see that list? I want to make sure I've got them spelled right."

Tonks stumbled into the room, weighted down but a large box of toys. "Okay, I've gotten the last of the toys for the kids, and I got the reply we've been waiting on. They agreed."

"What's going on?" Harry asked suddenly, coming up from behind Hermione.

Everyone was silent for a moment, then Sirius walked towards the two children. "Well, do you remember how you said you wanted to help Santa give out presents this year?" Harry and Hermione nodded. "I spoke with Santa, and he said that he would love to have you and Hermione help him. That is, if you two still want to help Santa give presents to other kids." Harry's eyes lit up. "You have to remember now, that none of these presents are for you, okay?"

Harry nodded happily as a grin spread over his face. "Do I really get to meet Santa? Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon used to take Dudley out to see him, but they would never take me along with them. But if I help him, I really get to see him, right? And Hermione too, right? We both get to see him?"

Sirius forced himself to grin, but Hermione could see the anger flashing in his eyes at the mention of the Dursleys. "Of course! You will both get to see him. He's looking forward to meeting the two of you in person, especially since he heard you would like to help him out. He likes it when children like you two want to help him. Christmas is all about giving, you know."

Harry's eyes seemed to light up as he looked around the room. "Can I help you with the presents? Can I please?" His stomach grumbled and he flushed. "Can I have breakfast first though?"

The adults laughed heartily. "I think we could all use a breakfast break, but I don't think there's room for us in here," Remus said. "Perhaps we should have all of the presents that Santa sent over to the dining room so that we can have breakfast."

Sirius sighed as he leaned against the counter. "I just wish there was an easier way to do this. I don't think we'll be able to get all of this done before... Santa is here, even with Harry and Hermione helping."

Hermione drew in a breath and made a suggestion she would never have made if the circumstances were different. "Why don't you ask the house - elves to help you? I'm sure they could wrap the presents without any trouble at all. Then Harry and I could put on the labels,

and you, Papa Remus and Dora can write down the names of the kids who get them.” *It’s for a good cause, and I’ll... I’ll give them a bonus or something.*

Remus sighed this time. “It’s a nice idea, but then we wouldn’t know what’s what.”

It took a great deal of effort not to roll her eyes. *All they need is to cast a simple Transperus charm and they would be able to see through the paper!* “Are you sure there isn’t a spell that will let you look through the packaging or something like that? Maybe a charm that will let you see the toy?”

Tonks’ eyes lit up. “Hey, we could use the Transperus charm! Usually it’s sixth year stuff at Hogwarts, but it was added to the list of necessary spells aurors have to know about a year ago! It makes it easier to look inside of stuff to see if potentially Dark wizards are hiding anything!”

“Excellent idea, Dora!” Remus grinned. Tonks beamed back. Hermione sighed and set about making breakfast alongside Harry while the adults discussed with the house - elves what needed to be done.

“It’s okay, Hermione,” Harry whispered to her. “I know it was your idea. Adults always think that they come up with all of the good ideas, even when kids like us come up with them first.”

Hermione felt some of the tension leave her and smiled at her friend, a sudden warmth filling her heart. It was nice to know that Harry was there and that he understood what she had been trying to do. He may not have known that she had been able to perform the spell flawlessly when she was in sixth year, but he understood that she had been leading the adults to her way of thinking. It was nice to know that Harry was on her side, no matter what seemed to happen.

Breakfast was a simple matter of toast. Hermione had managed to convince Harry to let her put butter on his toast, along with sugar and cinnamon for a tasty treat. It had been a spur of the moment decision. Typically, it was the traditional breakfast she woke up to the day before, the day of, and the day after Christmas. She had fought with

herself the night before on whether to continue her mother's tradition, or to push it to the far corners of her mind. Ultimately it was Harry, who had wanted something sweet, that had made the decision for her.

Once that was done, Harry and Hermione grabbed the muggle labels and set to work putting them on all of the newly wrapped packages. Hermione was tempted to ask how Sirius and Remus had managed to not only get a list of children's names and what they wanted, but also the actual gifts, complete with muggle wrapping paper and labels. In the end, she decided she would rather not know, as she was quite sure they very likely did something highly illegal, however well - meaning it was.

Once their task was done, the two decided to play in the snow and let Sirius, Remus and Tonks work on their project without two kids underfoot. After the construction of snow - family and a snow - fort, the two engaged in a snowball fight that left the two of them soaking wet and with snow in places snow was not supposed to be—Hermione was quite sure Harry had somehow managed to get snow up her nose. Tonks had taken the role of mother hen, and took the time to make them both cocoa.

A late lunch was served after the pair drank the hot chocolate. This time the house - elves had served hot sandwiches. It was a pleasant change from the days of cold sandwiches and soup with too much salt. Harry and Hermione shared a look, both glad that the days of Sirius, Remus or Tonks cooking were long gone.

Throughout their time at Grimmauld Place, the house - elves had come to enjoy the freedoms they had been granted. At first they had railed against the changes, but soon came to appreciate not having to punish themselves for making simple mistakes. The uniforms, too, grew on them, as they saw it as a distinguishing mark of who they served. Dobby, who wore a coat with the initials HP embroidered over his heart, along with all of the others, who wore coats with the initials HG over their hearts, donned their uniforms with pride and honour. Hermione suspected that they were so willing to go out and run errands because they wanted to show off who they served.

"Alright you two, do you still want to help Santa? If you want to quit, now's the time to do it," Sirius said.

"We still want to help," Harry chirped, bouncing a little in his seat. Hermione nodded as well, if only to sate her curiosity about what they were planning. Of course, helping people was in her nature, and she was always more than willing to lend a hand to those in need. She thought that whatever they would be doing was a wonderful idea.

"Okay," Remus grinned before he reached under the table and pulled out... green suits. "These are your super - official uniforms. Aren't they neat?"

Hermione felt her jaw drop. 'Neat' was not the words she would have chosen to describe them. The costume was even worse than she could have imagined. It was a bright green tunic with a red sash for a belt, red and white striped tights, and genie - like shoes, complete with a bell on the toe. Harry swallowed beside her. "Great," he said, his voice slightly squeaky as he looked at what he was going to have to wear.

"And look," Remus said with a mischievous grin. "Hats!" He pulled out two hats the same colour as the tunics. Hermione winced along with Harry when they heard the jangle of the bell on the hat. "We've charmed them to be warm, so you don't need to worry about getting cold when you're with Santa."

"I guess this means we won't be able to sneak up on anyone," Hermione muttered under her breath before she looked up. "I'm sure that Santa's plan will work out wonderfully," she said. Harry could only nod absently as he stared, mortified, at the outfits they were to wear when they went to help *Santa*.

"Erm, why do we have to wear costumes, though? Why can't the other kids know who we are?" Harry asked.

The adults shared a look. "Well," Tonks decided to answer. "It has to be a secret. The problem is, if other kids know that *you* know Santa, they'll never leave you alone about him. Besides, you wanted to help give out presents, not to have everyone want to be your friend just because you know Santa, right?"

"No, I just want to help. I don't really like it that a whole bunch of kids want to be my friend because of my scar," he said, making another vain attempt to flatten his hair and hide his scar. "I don't want them to want to be my friend because of Santa." The adults nodded in satisfaction. Hermione chose to remain silent, but inwardly felt very pleased that Harry was turning out to be the modest boy she had known back in first year.

"Good, then you won't mind wearing your disguises, right?" Sirius grinned.

Harry winced as she looked at the costumes again but nodded his understanding. Tonks chuckled. "Well, if we want to do this properly, Hermione, we'd better get you into your disguise. Sirius will be helping you, Harry, and Remus will be looking after our little Dewdrop and sending a letter to Santa to let him know that everything is ready for him."

"Hey," Harry said, suddenly coming out of his daze. "How's come you wrapped the presents and put the kids' names on them? Shouldn't Santa or his elves have done that?"

Hermione looked to the adults to see what they would say. "Well," Remus began. "Santa is a very busy man, you know, and he needed some help, so he asked us to help him out since he knew that you and Hermione were going to help him. He was very glad to hear that we were willing to give him a hand. He likes it when people help him help others."

"Harry, Hermione," Sirius said as he came forward and knelt before them. "I just wanted to say, before you both get ready to go, that we are very proud of both of you. Harry, I know that if James and Lily could see you now, they could not have been more proud to know that their son knows that the true meaning of Christmas is about *giving* and not *receiving*. You are doing a lot of good, and for people you don't even know. Perhaps, one day, when the kids you helped are all grown up, they'll remember that one special Christmas where they got to meet Santa and two of his elves."

"I never met your parents Hermione," Remus said, wrapping an arm around her shoulders and pulling her to his side. "But I know what

kind of a little girl you are, and I know that your parents would be very proud to see that you are going to help other kids, even if they never know it was you who helped them.”

Tonks knelt down in front of them. “We are very proud of you too, both of you.” Tonks absently set Harmony in her lap. “The truth of it is, kids, is that we could not be any more proud of you for what you are doing than what we already are.” She was quiet a moment. “Come on, we need to get the two of you dressed in your disguises. Santa will be here fairly soon, and he’s even bringing Mrs. Claus with him. He thought it would be a nice idea to let the kids at the Orphanage get to meet his wife before he sets to work giving presents to everyone around the world.”

Tonks handed Harmony off to Remus and took Hermione by the hand and led her out of the room. “You don’t seem very excited, Hermione. Is something wrong?”

Hermione sighed. “You don’t want us to be recognized because of who we are, not because of who we know. That’s why you want us to wear those costumes, isn’t it?”

Tonks stopped and looked down at her. “What makes you think that?” Hermione gave the older woman a look and Tonks sighed. “You’re too smart by half, Hermione, you know that?” The older woman sighed again and continued down the hall. “Yes, those outfits are so that no one will recognize you. We don’t want to risk the two of you being followed by the press, especially since we won’t be there.”

“You won’t?” Hermione asked, one eyebrow raised.

“Of course not, smarty. If we go, you might be recognized. We managed to pull off going unnoticed at the Yule Festival for the most part because it was cold enough that you had to wear hats and you were all bundled up. Not to mention how much you’ve grown, you and Harry. It’s the little things like height that sometimes make all of the difference in the world.”

Hermione nodded as they entered her barren room to get dressed. The costume fit her perfectly, much to her dismay. It wasn’t that she didn’t want to give out presents, because she did. In fact, it was just

the sort of thing she would do. She just didn't want to have to wear the disguise. Oh how she longed for the days when she didn't have to bother hiding who she was, and actually strove to stand out. *I may have wanted to stand out, but I wanted it to be for my mind, not my clothes*, she thought with a heavy sigh. This was not going to be pretty.

Then minutes later she looked at herself in the mirror and cringed. She looked worse than she had imagined. "Perk up, Hermione, it's not that bad." Tonks said, even as she fought to keep a grin from her face. "Besides, you get to be one of Santa's helpers."

"I don't mind helping Santa," Hermione said tiredly. "But I don't like being dressed up like a clown."

Tonks chuckled and opened her bedroom door to lead her out. "But you don't look like a clown, you look like a Hermione - elf. You're cute," she grinned.

Hermione grimaced and walked out of her room, jingling all the way. Just as she crossed her doorway, she heard Harry's door opened and watched her friend walk out, his expression horrified as he jangled his way over to her.

"Buck up, Harry. It's for a good cause," Hermione said softly. "Hey, at least they're not going to put make up on us." Harry nodded his head vigorously, the bell on his cap jingling and jangling away.

He paused and looked back at Tonks. "Do we have to wear these?"

She chuckled. "Yes. Just think of it as an adventure. You only live once, you know."

Unless you're me, Hermione thought. Harry looked up at Sirius, pouting.

Sirius laughed. "Get a move on it, you two. Santa and his wife, Mrs. Claus should be here by now."

Harry immediately perked up and began to walk with a slight bounce in his step. Hermione, curious as to who would be playing the role Jolly

Old Saint Nicholas, followed Harry down the hall and into the kitchen. At first she didn't recognize the two newcomers, until she heard the Santa chuckle.

The young witch cracked a grin and looked at the headmaster of Hogwarts. He was barely recognizable, in the big red suit that was likely charmed to make him look bigger around than the slim man actually was. His beard seemed shorter, and it looked like he had a pair of round spectacles rather than his half - moon set. His bright blue eyes, however, were much the same as always.

Beside him stood a plump woman. She, too, wore round spectacles, and wore an old fashioned crimson robe trimmed in white fur to match Professor Dumbledore's. It was her Scottish brogue that gave her away in the end. *I almost didn't recognize her. I think they must have used a glamour or something like that.*

"Ah," Professor Dumbledore, or rather, *Santa* said. "I see my help for the evening has arrived. Just in time, too. I have my sleigh outside. Right now we need to load up the presents for the other children and then we can go, alright?"

"Okay Santa!" Harry exclaimed with a grin before his smile slipped from his face. He began to shift uncomfortably. "Um, Santa? I just wanted to let you know that I live here now, okay? And that I'll try really hard to be a good boy." Harry nodded firmly as though he were making a promise.

"Just a moment," Mrs. Claus interrupted. "We can't exactly go around calling them by their names, or everyone will know who they are."

It is so strange to hear Professor McGonagall's voice coming from that person, Hermione thought distantly. "We can always pretend our names are Dobby and Winky," she offered with a shrug. "I doubt that anyone would think we would use the names of our house - elves."

"Excellent idea, Hermione!" Remus beamed. "Well, Winky I guess. Those names should suffice. Now that we have that little detail cleared up, I think it best if we get everything ready to go, don't you? After all, it is getting late, and you want to be able to get them their Christmas gifts soon, don't you?"

“Oh, I don’t think it will be too much trouble,” Dumbledore said from behind his shortened beard. With a flick of his wand, the packages rose into the air and began to float towards the door. “My dear Mrs. Claus, would you be so kind as to get the door?”

Hermione couldn’t help but feel a little weird. If she didn’t know better, she would say that Professor Dumbledore was flirting with Professor McGonagall. The very idea redefined strange, in her mind. *Teachers should not flirt. That sort of thing should be against the law.*

She didn’t have time to ponder the oddity of flirting teachers, however, as she heard Harry gasp by the door. Turning, she saw that something outside had his attention. Curious, she walked over and looked outside, only to gasp herself. It was a red sleigh, complete with bells on the side and reindeer. “Please tell me they don’t really fly.”

Dumbledore chuckled. “Sometimes I forget how little muggleborns know—”

A vase shattered, and Hermione immediately flushed and looked away. *Idiot!* She berated herself. *He didn’t mean anything by it, he’s Professor Dumbledore! I really need to work on controlling my temper better.*

“Forgive an old man,” Dumbledore said quietly, understanding in his blue eyes. “Sometimes I also forget how careless I can sometimes be. I did not mean to imply that there is anything wrong with being a muggleborn. Rather, because you have not been in our world all of your life, there are bound to be things you do not know. The idea of flying reindeer is a myth— flying reindeer to not exist, even in the wizarding world. These will merely be pulling the sleigh we will be riding in. The muggles do love their myths, you know. I did not mean to offend.”

“It’s alright, sir,” Hermione said tightly. “I know you didn’t mean anything bad. I just remembered... other times when people with muggle parents weren’t thought to be very smart.” *Voldemort, Malfoy, Umbridge... the list goes on.*

"If reindeers don't really fly, how do you really deliver all of the presents?" Harry asked, his brow furrowed in confusion.

"Ah," Dumbledore chuckled. "Apparation! I can appear," he disappeared and reappeared beside Harry with a small pop. "Anywhere I want to." He smiled. "It makes delivering presents much easier, but I thought that, since you wanted to help, and since we are giving gifts to muggles, that we would uphold their stories about flying reindeer. It is all in the spirit of giving, why not give them their dreams?"

"Now, I think it best to be a bit more thorough. Muggles, you see, know that elves have pointed ears, and it just so happens that a simple glamour will give the both of you that appearance as well." The headmaster flicked his wand and Hermione felt a tingling in her ears. Cautiously, she reached up and felt the pointed tip of her ear and watched Harry do the same. "Very powerful, this glamour, you can see it and touch it, and it appears real. It will wear off in about ten hours, so there is nothing we need to worry about."

Harry nodded his understanding and jangled his way over to the door. "Well, we better get going," he grunted under the weight of the packages. "I know you have lots of places to be, Santa, and Herm—erm, Winky and I will help you get this done so that you can deliver the rest of our presents, right Her— Winky?" She could see he was tense with excitement.

Hermione smiled and jangled her way over to stand by her friend. "Right, Dobby." She couldn't help the small smile— his enthusiasm was contagious. The adults laughed before they walked outside to the sleigh and helped set the gifts down so that none of them would be damaged. Privately, Hermione was amazed that Sirius and Remus had managed to get the entire project organized and executed in one night.

She climbed onto the sleigh to sit to the right of Professor McGonagall while Harry sat to the left of the headmaster. As the sleigh began to pull away and head in the direction of the orphanage, Hermione wondered if, perhaps, there was more to this little

excursion than just Sirius being generous. Was there some lesson she and Harry were meant to learn?

Sirius had mentioned the meaning of Christmas... She already knew the meaning of giving to others— it was a lesson she had learned long ago. Once she was old enough to understand, her parents had insisted that she know what was happening in the country, and the misery that people lived with everyday so that she could understand that she was privileged to have everything that she did. Every winter the whole family would help run soup kitchens to feed the homeless, or give out blankets and clothes. It had been a real eye - opener, the first time a homeless man had looked at her like she was a godsend as she handed him a blanket when she was eight. It had shaped her world. It was these events from her childhood that fuelled her passion for helping the underdog, like house - elves.

She already knew that it was better to give than to receive, and she truly appreciated giving. So that begged the question, why were Sirius and Remus so keen on her and Harry doing this? Hermione snorted softly to herself. *Probably because they don't know everything that's happened to me, and they certainly don't know everything that I've done.* She sighed. *I don't know. Maybe I'll figure it out later.*

Truthfully, Hermione was glad that Sirius and Remus had decided to do some charity work. Hopefully they would do it every year, so that Harmony could join in when she was older. It was something that Hermione desperately wanted Harmony to experience. Helping others had helped Hermione learn something about herself, and it was a lesson Harry and Harmony needed to learn. *Though, considering what Harry grew up with, I doubt that he doesn't understand how privileged he is now. After going without love for five years, I think he understands more than Sirius or Remus give him credit for.*

Hermione looked around and saw that many people were gaping. Professor Dumbledore just smiled and waved at them every so often, as if driving a sleigh down the street was something he did everyday. The people driving cars didn't seem to mind— in fact, many pulled over so that they could get out and watch the sleigh go by.

A short while later, the headmaster drove the sleigh up to a building with several children peering excitedly out the window. A moment later, the door opened and an older boy, about thirteen came out. "I'll prove it, once and for all, there ain't no Santa—" he turned around and saw the sleigh. His jaw dropped. "Claus," he finished weakly.

Professor Dumbledore chuckled as he stood and stepped down from the sleigh as Harry slid down the side. The young boy's face hardened as he watched. "He's a fake, I'll show you." He walked to Professor Dumbledore, who had just gotten down from the sleigh. "I bet his beard ain't even real," he said, then snatched the headmaster's beard and yanked with all of his might.

"Now Jeremy," the headmaster chided gently. "That isn't very nice. You shouldn't tell me I don't exist and pull my beard." Hermione didn't bother wasting time wondering how the headmaster knew his name—he was Professor Dumbledore, after all.

The boy, Jeremy, backed away and swallowed nervously. "S-sorry," he muttered.

Dumbledore chuckled. "Quite alright, my boy. Just don't do it again." His eyes twinkled madly. He grinned. "Well, I know that I'm rather early this evening. I'm running a bit ahead of schedule you see. However, young Jeremy, I'm sure my elves would not mind your helping them carry the gifts in." He winked.

Jeremy nodded dumbly and made his way over to where Harry and Hermione had stood as they watched the scene play out. The young boy looked at them, taking in their pointed ears and swallowing. "Elves," he said weakly. "I can't believe it."

Hermione smiled consolingly at him. "I'm Winky, and this is Dobby. I understand you'll be helping us, then?" He nodded weakly, staring at her ears. Neither of them noticed Harry shoot a small glare at the boy. He didn't like it when people stared at Hermione.

"Why don't you grab a stack of presents— and remember, no peeking and trying to find your own." Jeremy nodded and grabbed the stack closest to him before heading back to the orphanage. "Here we go," she muttered under her breath and grabbed the next stack of gifts

then jangled her way to the door, Harry jingling behind her. Even knowing she was helping Sirius and Remus do something wonderful, she couldn't help but feel a bit foolish, considering her 'disguise'.

The feeling vanished the moment she stepped through the threshold and saw the merriment around her. The room was only a few meagre decorations, and a small, half - dead Christmas tree. The children, including the older kids, were clustered around the headmaster, staring up at him in awe. The woman who ran the place was looking on, sitting in the far corner of the room, slightly dazed. *I think I'd be a bit out of sorts too if a couple dressed as Mr. and Mrs. Claus came in with two elves to give out presents.*

The trio made several trips to carry in the packages while *Santa* and his wife told tales about the North Pole. No one questioned the sweets that seemed to appear from nowhere, as they were nothing compared to the living legend standing in the room.

At one point, Hermione had lost track of where Harry was in all of the chaos, and went in search of him. Fortunately he was easy to find, courtesy of the jingling bells on his shoes and hat. "And you swear that no one locks any of the kids here in a cupboard? What about a closet, do they lock anybody in a closet?" He asked a young girl of about four.

Feeling her heart break a little, Hermione drew his attention away from the puzzled children. "Dobby," she said, desperately trying to keep her calm. "Are you sure we got all of the gifts?" Harry nodded and opened his mouth to respond.

"Well," Professor Dumbledore unknowingly interrupted. "I believe I have some presents to give out— it is Christmas, after all, and I have a great many more stops to make before the night is through. Gather 'round, gather 'round, and I'll pass them out, then, shall I?"

There was a great cheer from the children as he picked up the first gift. "I believe the first give goes to our very own Jeremy, who was kind enough to help my elves bring these in," he said, his eyes twinkling brightly. Smiling gaily, the headmaster began to give out presents left and right, always matching the name to the face, though he had never met any of the children before. Professor McGonagall,

meanwhile, was going around, handing out sweets and small cups of juice that Hermione suspected had been charmed against being spilled.

Harry stood beside Hermione, looking on. "I'm glad we got to help Santa, but I wish we could do more," he said softly.

Hermione glanced at Harry. She realized, suddenly, that Harry didn't know that this was a spur of the moment decision that Sirius and Remus made. He didn't know that *he* was the reason these kids were getting present, why they were laughing and playing and looking the man in the red suit in awe.

She smiled softly at him. "You've done enough, Harry," she whispered in his ear. *You've certainly given enough, whether you, or anyone else, knows it.* Harry smiled at her and returned to watching the scene play out.

Professor McGonagall came up to them and handed them both a cup of juice and a few sweets to snack on before she knelt down to look them in their eyes. "Both Mr. Claus and I are very proud of you," she said quietly. "It's wonderful that the both of you wish to help so much. Well done."

A short while later, Santa, his wife and his elves returned to their sleigh and rode away, waving to the children behind them as they left. Hermione sat quietly, watching the cars and people they passed as Harry began to doze off. All in all, she felt wonderful. The role she played had been small, almost unnoticeable, but that wasn't what warmed her heart. She looked fondly at her dearest friend and smiled, amazed at how much good one person could do.

Feeling exhaustion overtake her, Hermione curled up beside Harry in the sleigh and drifted off to sleep, satisfied with the day's events.

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A/N:

In case you are curios, the purpose of this chapter was to flesh out their characters a little bit. I'm the sort of person who likes to have

explanations for everything, so I used this chapter as a way to explain why Hermione is so defensive of the underdog. If all goes as I plan, this chapter will have a big impact on how Harry will react in the future, as well.

The next chapter I'm very excited about—Christmas! A cheerful chapter, with a few revelations. I have to admit, I envy those kids. They're going to get an awesome Christmas, in my opinion. But then, they deserve it, don't they?

Well, thank you everyone who took the time to read, and special thanks to everyone who reviewed last time—again, it's wonderful to be back! That said, please review!

Cheers,

Madm05

Chapter Seventeen: Receiving

“Hermione! Get up, you’ve got to get up! It’s Christmas Hermione! It’s Christmas morning and we got presents!” Harry shouted excitedly, jumping up and down on the bed. “Get up! Get up! Let’s go get Papa Sirius and Uncle Remus and go open our presents! Do you think we got toys? Do you? Or do you think we got clothes? I wouldn’t mind if we got clothes, especially if they fit, would you? I would really like some toys, but clothes are better than nothing.” He was still jumping on the bed.

“Eugh,” Hermione tried to roll over, a difficult feat as her friend was still bouncing on the bed. She had never been this excited about Christmas, had she? “G’way, Hawwy. M’seepin’. Go.” The young witch was terribly tired. After her brief nap in the sleigh, she had returned home only to be ushered off to one of the guests room with Harry, but couldn’t sleep because of a nagging thought at the back of her mind. She couldn’t help but think there was something she had forgotten, but couldn’t for the life of her remember what it was. *And my dream*, she thought, cringing inwardly. Even now, after Harry had pulled her from her sleep, she couldn’t believe that her dream self had married the Dark Harry.

She had a few ideas why Sirius and Remus wanted them out of their rooms, but nothing concrete. There were obviously doing something in Harry’s room, but had to make her sleep somewhere else or Harry would guess. Even Harmony had been moved for the night. *It’s not like they would do anything for my room. I can’t have hardly anything in there anyways, since it’s too dangerous.* She understood that they were obviously planning something, but she didn’t see why she had to share a room with Harry. It wasn’t as if there weren’t at least a dozen rooms on this floor alone that weren’t being used, even with the school in operation.

Hermione didn’t particularly mind sharing a room with Harry, or even a bed for that matter, as he didn’t move around as much as his older counterpart did. *Likely because this Harry never saw Voldemort rise, or saw Cedric or Sirius or even Professor Dumbledore die.* Not only that, but she had fallen asleep next to Harry and Ron too many times before for it to be awkward. *Just because I don’t mind sleeping next*

to him doesn't mean I like being woken up this early. Is the sun even up?

"But Hermione," he whined and collapsed on the bed, laying down so that he was facing her. "It's already after five! Are you going to sleep away *all* of Christmas morning?"

Hermione looked up fuzzily. Did he just say it was five in the morning? What was wrong with the boy? She blinked and got a good look at his expression and felt her heart melt. He looked so excited and so hopeful that he would actually get toys for Christmas. "Come on, Hermione! Santa knows where I live now, and I think he really brought me something! That means I really was a good boy!"

Hermione mentally cursed the Dursleys again and forced herself to sit up. "Alright Harry," she agreed. "You go get Uncle Sirius up, and I'll get Papa Remus. I'll grab Harmony on the way to the family room, okay?" She shook her head in amusement as he bounded off the bed and dashed out of the room. Hermione smiled and slipped out of bed, Harry's excitement rubbing off on her.

Pulling on her slippers, she left the fairly empty room and set off down the hall to the staircase and going down to the first floor. Once she reached the bottom, she forced herself not to look at the beautiful Christmas tree, or t even allow herself to look into the family room, so that everything would be a surprise. Continuing down the hall, she was amused that she could still hear Harry, who had already strong - armed his way into Sirius' room.

Hermione heard a sound that vaguely resembled a troll groaning, and knew that Harry had pounced on Sirius. Ever dignified, Hermione pushed Remus' door open and walked calmly into the Room. "Papa Remus," she said. "It's time to get up." He didn't move. Hermione shook his shoulder. He made a noise but didn't move.

Sighing, Hermione decided to do something completely un-Hermione like. She jumped on the bed yelling "Papa Remus, get up, it's Christmas!" She collapsed onto the bed as Remus shot up. *That was more satisfying than I thought it would be. I'll have to find a reason to act like a little kid again soon. That was fun.*

"M'wake, m'wake," he mumbled, stretching and yawning. "Wha time s'it?"

Hermione giggled. "A little after five, last I heard." Remus gave her a fuzzy look. "Harry woke me up. He was so excited I couldn't tell him to go back to sleep."

Remus nodded his agreement and pushed his blankets away. "Yes, he seems to have that effect on people. Let me get my house coat, then we'll get Harmony and head to the family room, okay?"

Nodding, Hermione slipped off the bed and walked to Harmony's crib, knowing it had been moved to Remus' room for the night. She was shocked to find the crib empty. "Harmony's gone!" Hermione shrieked.

Panicked, Remus leapt over his bed to get to the crib. Sure enough, Harmony was gone. The two raced for the door, both shouting "Harmony! Where are you?"

"What's going on?" Sirius asked, coming out of his room with Harry in his arms and his expression panicked.

"We can't find Harmony," Remus said, his voice shaking and his eyes wide with fear.

Sirius, Harry still in his arms, immediately turned and began to hunt for the toddler along with the others. Harry, getting in the spirit of the hunt, squirmed out of Sirius' arms and made his way to the kitchen with Hermione and began looking inside every pot he could to find Harmony. Hermione, more practical, began searching through the cabinets that Harmony had discovered a few weeks before and liked to hide in.

Breathing hard and shaking, Hermione continued her search. *Did someone break in, and Remus not know it? Was she kidnapped? Did she somehow get out of her crib and decide to play a game of hide - and - seek? Oh, Harmony! Where are you?* Suddenly she heard something ripping and someone giggling. Rounding the corner, Hermione's jaw dropped.

Harmony was sitting in the family room, merrily ripping a piece of wrapping paper to shreds and tossing it into the air. Hermione didn't know whether to be relieved that her sister was okay, angry that her sister had given her such a fright, or proud of her sister's excellent escape. "I found her," she called instead. "She's in the family room." Hermione paused. "I see books, so I think she's opening my presents," she muttered.

Harry immediately dropped the pot lid he was looking under and peaked around the corner. "That's funny," he said thoughtfully. "She wasn't there when I first came in." Hermione was about to tell him that her sister had always been something of an escape artist, and that she was very good at hiding if she didn't want to be found, but didn't have the time as Sirius and Remus came skidding into the room.

Remus scooped Harmony into his arms, holding her close and heaving a sigh of relief. "Harmony," he panted, "please, please don't do that again," his voice was still shaking. He looked down and chuckled, his laugh slightly hysterical. "I see you've opened two of your sister's gifts. Amazing how you only went after hers."

"Well, since we're all here, we might as well go about opening our gifts. But first," Sirius stepped over towards the fireplace and grabbed red hat trimmed in white and pulled it onto his head. "This was a tradition that your grandparents started when your dad was a little boy, Harry. Now, I'll be Jolly Old Saint Nick's helper and give out presents. Who wants to be a reindeer, and who wants to be an elf?" He asked, holding two sets of reindeer antlers and two green elf hats.

"I... um... I'll let Hermione pick," Harry said, looking at the antlers with a touch of longing but clearly planning to choose what Hermione chose.

Hermione suppressed a smile. "Since I was an elf yesterday, I think I'd like to be a reindeer for Christmas if it's alright with you, Uncle Sirius."

Sirius, having seen Harry's look smiled at Hermione, his gratitude shining in his eyes. "I don't see a problem with that. Here you go, Hermione, and you want a pair too, right Harry? And that means that Moony and the naughty little Dewdrop get the elf hats." Sirius gave

Remus a look. "We need to either get her a new crib to sleep in, or we need to put some enchantments on the one she's using now. She's much too talented at getting out. I caught her climbing down the side of it yesterday." He said, handing over the hats.

"I thought that I would wake up if she tried to climb out." Remus sighed and pulled one of the hats over his head. He looked ridiculous—the hat was obviously made for a child. "We might as well let Hermione look at the two gifts that Harmony opened."

Hermione picked up the first gift and felt her eyes water. It was a large, leather bound book, titled *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*. Her parents had adored Shakespeare, and had taught her to love his works as well. "Thank you," she said softly. "I love it." Hermione held the book close and wondered what her parents were doing. Were they watching her through the wall? She felt a sudden weight on her shoulder, but when she looked, she saw nothing.

Remus looked slightly nervous. "We saw lots of books by Shakespeare when we were at your old house. Sirius and I thought you might like it. You took a lot of books with you, but I don't think any of them were by Shakespeare. Those books were... not in very good shape."

Hermione sniffled. "I love it. Really," she said again. She set the book delicately in what she claimed as her area for opened gifts and bent to pick up the other gift and stopped mid reach. It was *The Phantom of the Opera* by Gaston Leroux. And it was identical to the copy she had lost the night she lost her parents and Uncle.

"Oh no," Harry said, tears filling his emerald eyes as he caught sight of Hermione's second gift. "That was my present. I really wanted to see Hermione open it. She said it was her favourite book."

Hermione swallowed thickly then grabbed the book before making her way to Harry and pulling him into a tight embrace. "Thank you, Harry," she said quietly. "Thank you so much, it's wonderful."

She didn't think she would ever be able to tell them how much these two gifts meant to her. True, they were just simple muggle books, but the thought that everyone had put into these two gifts meant more to

her than she could put into words. No one else would have gotten her something so ordinary, so muggle, and yet so special.

“Thank you,” she managed to say again, still holding Harry in her arms, almost unwilling to let go of the boy who had given her such a precious gift.

Harry blushed. “It was nothing, Hermione. Papa Sirius and I had a hard time finding it though. We couldn’t find it at first, so we had to ask for help. Everyone kept looking at us funny, too.”

Hermione laughed. Considering how they were likely dressed and that they had had to go to a muggle bookstore, she didn’t doubt that people had stared at them. They must have made an unusual sight indeed. “Who’s going to open the next present?” Hermione asked, deciding to turn the conversation away from her and the muggle world.

“Well, we can have Harry and Harmony both open two presents at the same time to get them caught up with our favourite bookworm,” Sirius said with a wink.

“That’ll do. Here you are Harry, there’s two there, but wait until Harmony starts to open hers. These are your presents from Hermione, and one of your gifts from me and Padfoot,” Remus said, handing the gifts to Harry then pulling out two more for Harmony.

“You’re stealing my job,” Sirius pouted.

Harry grabbed the packages with as much courtesy as a six - year - old boy could manage, but Hermione saw the excitement shining in his eyes as he grabbed Hermione’s gift first. He waited until Harmony began to tear open the paper on her first gift before he joined in and ripped the paper away. Sirius and Remus looked on, both curious about the present— Hermione had refused to tell anyone about any of the gifts she had bought. Everyone’s eyes seemed to water when they saw Harry pull out the stuffed stag.

“James,” Remus breathed.

“Prongs,” Sirius whispered.

"Dad," Harry choked.

The only sound for a long moment was the crackling of the fire and the ripping of paper over Harmony's giggling at her new lion. Harry stared at the simple toy, seemingly awestruck. Hermione felt a surge of panic. *Does he hate it? Was a being too forward? Perhaps I should have given him something less... symbolic. Maybe it's bringing up memories he would rather not think of. I'm so stupid!*

"Thank you," Harry said at last, his voice choked with emotion. "You gave me my dad, Hermione. Thank you." The young boy twisted and wrapped his arms tight around her. "Thank you," he said again.

Hermione hugged him back, glad that he liked her gift and understood what she was trying to do. In truth, she had always wanted to get Harry something like this, but hadn't thought it was appropriate to get a stuffed toy for him, especially considering who he shared a dorm with. "You're welcome, Harry."

"Well," Sirius cleared his throat, "why don't we continue on with this, eh? Otherwise you'll never get the chance to open the rest of your presents. Come on, Harry, open up your next gift. Harmony has already torn into hers," he said, nodding to Harmony who was gurgling happily over a new doll.

Harry carefully set the stuffed stag beside him then opened the other gift. "Oh neat!" Harry grinned. "It's a snitch!"

"It's not a real one," Remus said. "It's a practice snitch. I don't think you're ready for a real one just yet, but this will work well enough for now. Besides," he winked at Hermione. "I have it on good authority that you're going to be a Seeker."

"Right, let's open up some more presents!" Sirius chirped, searching through the presents, looking for one with his name. Hermione smiled to herself and shook her head. He truly reminded her of a little kid sometimes, when he wasn't being an over protective guardian.

Remus snorted and grinned at this friend then set Harmony in his lap while Hermione returned to her original seat. "Well, Santa - Helper Padfoot, are you going to give presents to the kids, or am I going to

have to take that hat from you and do it myself?" Sirius pouted, but began passing out the presents.

Hermione suppressed a sigh. This was the very first Christmas that she had ever had without her parents. Even in the other timeline, she had been able to spend that one final Christmas with them, as the Death Eaters had attacked her home on New Years Eve.

Oh, there were the years that she had stayed at Hogwarts, but she had always been able to owl them their gifts, and write them letters. Sometimes they would send Christmas pictures back and forth. But not this year. This year there would be no letters, no gifts, no cards, no pictures. She had only memories of past Christmases with her family.

Forcefully pushing thoughts of her parents away, Hermione focused on her gifts in an attempt to enjoy this Christmas. Harry was having a wonderful time, even jumping for joy when he opened packages with clothes in them. Hermione did notice that Harry was always careful to never knock over the stag, and would sometimes reach over and pet it, just to be sure it was still there.

In the end, Sirius looked like he was on the brink of tears when he opened the painting Hermione had gotten for him, and had hugged her tightly when she had told him what Helena had told her of how the painting came to be. Sirius seemed to be lost in distant memories as he gazed at the painting for long minutes. Much like Harry would reach over and pet his stag, so Sirius would occasionally look over at the painting and be lost to everyone. He hung it over the fireplace, for all to see, he had said, but Hermione noticed that he spent much time next to it, just looking at his past.

Remus, too, looked as though he were going to cry when he opened the Discipline Pendant and discovered that, while it wasn't a cure for lycanthropy, it may very well give him some control and freedom from the Wolfsbane potion. He had smiled gently at her as he slipped the worn chain around his neck. Every so often, he would grab the pendant and just look at it, a glimmer of hope in his eyes, and smile.

Even Horace was gnawing happily on a bone she had convinced Remus to let her buy after they had left Helena's little shop, and

Romulus had hooted happily at his new box of owl treats. All in all, Hermione thought she had managed to get good gifts for her makeshift family.

Harmony had giggled at every present she opened, seeming to enjoy ripping the paper more than actually getting toys. When she had finished, she had a large collection of dolls, toy unicorns that pranced about, pixies that would fly around her head, a myriad of stuffed animals similar to the lion Hermione had given her, and a toy chest with her name engraved on top. After she had opened all of her gifts, Harmony seemed to have more fun inside of her toy chest than actually playing with her toys— every time she tried to shut the lid to lock herself in, the lid automatically popped open as a child - safety feature. To her delight, Harmony also received a bag of sweets that she snuck into every time Remus looked away. She didn't realize that Remus knew she was eating the chocolate because of the evidence smeared around her mouth.

Harry on the other hand gasped excitedly at every package he opened. In addition to his toy snitch, he received several new sets of clothes as he was rapidly outgrowing his old robes, a set of Quidditch robes charmed so that they would match any team he wanted, a set of toy wizards whose wands would light up, dragons that would actually fly around the room, a toy chest also engraved with his name, and several figurine sets of Quidditch teams. Harry had also received a bag of sweets, but unlike Harmony, he always asked if he could have one.

Hermione, meanwhile, had only gotten a few toys. Most of her gifts consisted of books. She had received the entire collection of Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, and J.R.R. Tolkien amongst others. Perhaps her favourite of the muggle novels she received from Remus was *The Little Prince*, by Antoine De Saint-Exupéry. It seemed Sirius and Remus had no idea what to get her, so they ended up buying all sorts of muggle classics, and a large collection of wizarding books. It was a little disheartening to have so many books and not be allowed to keep them in her room. She also received the toy chest with her name engraved on the top, and a set of figurines. She was amused to find that they were all famous witches and wizards, and even several

muggles, who were known for various academic achievements. Just as with Harry and Harmony, Hermione also received a bag of sweets.

She had just set her bag of sweets aside when Sirius and Remus cleared their throats. "Harry, Hermione, we have one final present for you both," Sirius said. "Well, technically, we have two for you, Hermione, and we have something that we want you to keep for Harmony until she's older, okay?"

Hermione nodded, unsure she liked where this was going— they seemed so solemn. "First of all," Remus began. "One of your presents, Hermione, was something you should have gotten a while ago."

"Harry," Sirius handed a small box to the young boy. "It's time to give Hermione the special gift now."

Harry straightened up immediately, with his chest out and his shoulders back. He walked confidently to her and presented her with the box. Everything about him, his posture, his expression, his calm stance, exuded confidence, but Hermione could see the nervousness in his eyes.

Hermione accepted the box and looked at it curiously. It was small, and most likely a jewellery box. *Probably a bracelet or something like that*, she thought absently. She carefully opened the package and was unsurprised to find a small jewellery case with in. She opened the lid and drew in a sharp breath.

It was a ring.

"It's the betrothal ring for the Potter family," Harry said. "You're s'posed to wear it because you're my betrothed. You were s'posed to get it when we first became engaged, but Papa Sirius and Uncle Remus thought this would be better." He flicked his tongue nervously over his lips. "I'm s'posed to put it on you." He added in a rush. "But you can put it on yourself if you don't want me to."

She drew in a breath and handed him the box. "I'd hate to break tradition," she replied, her voice slightly squeaky. "You can put it on me." Hermione watched as he took the ring from the box when a

sudden thought occurred to her. She recalled, distantly, that many of the Slytherin girls had worn ring on their left hands, even in first year. At the time, she had thought it was unusual, that it was a quirk of the wizarding world. Now she knew how serious it was.

Hermione looked up into Harry's eyes as he slipped the ring on her finger. Neither noticed the strange golden glow that surrounded them, nor did they see the surprised looks Sirius and Remus shared.

"Well," Remus cleared his throat. "Now I think it's time for the other gifts. Come over here, sit in a circle, okay?" Hermione glanced at Harry but obeyed, though really she thought they were sitting in more of a box than a circle.

"Right, okay then," Sirius said, shifting slightly. "Oh, Merlin's beard. Kids, this isn't going to be a happy gift." Harry immediately began to look nervous. Hermione herself felt distinctly uncomfortable with that revelation. "But we wanted to give you something so that you could remember." He pulled three small packages out of the pocket of his robe, two wrapped in dark red paper, one not wrapped at all. "You first, Harry."

Harry took the box offered to him, licked his lips nervously, then set to work peeling off the paper. He slowly opened the box and gave Sirius a puzzled look and pulled out a necklace. "It belonged to your mother," he explained softly as Harry froze. "From when she was still in school.

"See the letters? See the JP connected to the LE? Well, the JP is your dad, James Potter. The LE was your mum, Lily Evans. He bought it for her for Christmas. She quit wearing it when they got married, because the initials didn't match and she never got around to changing it. It was recovered from your house after Voldemort attacked." Harry nodded then pulled the necklace out of the box, slipping the long chain around his neck and looked up, almost daring anyone to say anything about wearing his mother's necklace.

"Here's yours, Hermione," Remus said, taking the remaining two boxes from Sirius and handing her the remaining box that was wrapped. Hermione felt a shudder of fear go down her spine. What

lay within this box? *Only one way to find out*, she thought. Taking in a deep breath, she removed the wrapping and opened the box.

"These were my mum and dad's," she said softly, lifting a golden chain with three gold rings. "These are their wedding bands and mum's engagement ring."

Remus nodded. "You never said you wanted them, back in July, but I kept them anyways. I know that you were concentrating on your sister and probably didn't even think of it. I know it's not very happy, but you shouldn't forget your parents, no matter what. I thought that you might appreciate keeping a part of them with you." Hermione nodded and swallowed thickly before she pulled the chain over her head.

"This one," he sighed. "Is for Harmony, but I thought you might want to keep it for her." He handed her the remaining box. With some trepidation, she lifted the lid and removed a locket. Engraved on the front was 7/17/86, the date her parents and uncle died. Swallowing, she opened the locket to reveal a picture on her mother on the left, and her father on the right. What amazed her was that they were wizarding photos.

"We found some undeveloped film in your house," Remus explained. "I had it developed the wizarding way so that Harmony could see what her parents looked like, but most of them didn't come out very well—I think there may have been something wrong with the camera. Those were the only ones that came out well. Behind each picture is a lock of their hair." He shifted uncomfortably. "It's not really normal to do something like that, at least not in the wizarding world, but we know that Harmony never really got to know your parents, and we thought she might appreciate it."

Hermione winced at his words, knowing that she was the reason Harmony would never meet the people who gave her life. She nodded and clasped the locket tight in her hand and fought a surge of jealousy that her sister would get wizarding photos of their parents and she didn't. *Don't be a fool*, she chided herself. *Harmony deserves this. It's your fault she'll never meet mum and dad, so she should get this much at least.*

“Hey,” Harry said, a thought suddenly occurring to him. “We never got our present from Santa! Were we bad? Did we not do a good job helping him yesterday?” He asked, his eyes sad.

Sirius and Remus looked relieved at the change of topic and shared a conspiratorial look. “Not at all. You see, Harry, we were talking with Santa last night after you went to bed. He said that you two kids were amazing, and that he wanted to give you all, even Harmony though she was too young to help, a very special gift for helping him.” The two men shared another look then stood. “Come on, we’ll show you.”

Harry and Hermione exchanged curious glances, but followed their guardians and stopped in front of Hermione’s closed doorway. “Hermione, I want you to stand right here. Harry, go stand in front of your bedroom door,” Remus instructed. Harry looked a little confused, but went and stood in front of his door, Sirius following behind him.

“Alright, on the count of three, open them. One...” Sirius grinned. “One and a half...” He began to chuckle. “Two.” Hermione sighed, wondering what he was so giddy about. “Two and a half...” He was snickering now, along with Remus as he bounced Harmony in his arms. “Two and three quarters...” Harry began to fidget. “Three!”

Hermione opened the door and nearly fainted. “Oh my,” she breathed. Somehow, Remus and Sirius— or rather, *Santa*— had enchanted her room to make it look like a meadow surrounded by a forest. It was a beautiful sight to behold. Even the floor looked— and felt, she realized as she stepped into the room— like grass.

The wall to the left looked like a forest, and had animal life bounding about. There was a large oak tree in the very centre, that seemed to blend with her headboard. The wall opposite the door was a meadow, with grass swaying in a nonexistent wind. The blinds over her windows on the far wall were enchanted to match the scene of the meadow so that it blended well. The wall to the right was also a picture of a forest holly trees, but this time there was a small river, with a pair of otters playing.

Over head, clouds were painted onto the ceiling, but moved as though they too were being moved by the wind. Hermione gasped when she saw a stag dash through the trees and run into the glade

before he bowed his head and dashed off. She looked amazedly at a swing that hung from the ceiling, but looked as though it was suspended from one of the branches of the large oak tree.

Slightly overwhelmed, Hermione turned around, only to feel her jaw drop further. The largest bookshelf she had ever seen covered the entire fourth wall. Most of the shelves were empty, but Hermione imagined that was done on purpose, as the vast majority of her gifts this year had been books. It looked as though the bookcase was made of oak, much like the tree on her wall. There were only five shelves filled, and Hermione thought that it was very appropriate—there were five statues on the topmost shelf.

The statue on the far left was a bust of Queen Maeve, whom Hermione knew once taught witchcraft and wizardry long before Hogwarts became established. Next came Merlin, the Prince of enchanters himself. In the very centre, perched above her bedroom door, was a bust of the Greek Goddess Pallas Athena. Continuing the right, was Charles Dickens, followed by Jane Austen. In short, two of her heroes from the wizarding world, her favourite authors from the muggle world, and the Goddess of wisdom to watch over her.

“Oh my,” she managed again as she all but collapsed onto the swing and looked around dazedly.

“We put all sorts of spells over everything, so that you could keep it all in here,” Remus said. “There are even spells on the books that we bought you, so that you can keep them in here as well, along with everything else you got. Everything is fire resistant, water resistant, transfiguration resistant. It took a lot of enchanting, but it worked out in the end. Santa helped a great deal.

“Santa, Sirius and I had a hard time deciding who would get what,” Remus said softly as he stepped into the room. “You see, we thought that you would like this room better, but as you can see,” he nodded to the stag that had reappeared. “Harry would have appreciated certain aspects of it as well. In the end,” he sat down at the foot of her bed, right beside her on the swing. “I thought that, even though Prongs wasn’t your father, he would have liked you. And he would have watched over you.”

Remus sighed and looked at her. "I don't know whether or not you realize everything that you've done Hermione."

I've gotten my parents killed, she thought then immediately pushed her bitter thoughts away. Now wasn't the time to dwell on her mistakes.

"But you've done a lot of good." Remus continued, unaware of her inner struggle.

Yeah, Harry has already killed a man less than two weeks after his sixth birthday because of me. Now he has experience. Should make taking on Voldemort that much easier, don't you think? Hermione tried again to push her bitter thoughts aside.

"And I know that you've had it rough," he continued.

You have no idea. Hermione strained to keep her dark thoughts away.

"But I think that the storm clouds have passed, so to speak. I think we can finally relax, and be a normal family. Don't you think?" He looked over at her, a gentle smile on his face.

Maybe, but not if my luck runs out. "I hope so," she said, looking up at him. "I would really like that." She knew it was true. Now she truly understood why Harry wanted a normal life so badly. Ever since she had been a small child— in the first timeline— she had always wanted to be famous for some great discovery she had made. Now she longed for the days of anonymity, when she was nothing more than a bushy - haired bookworm waving her hand in the air.

Remus smiled kindly at her. "Come on, let's go look at the other rooms. I'm sure you'll like them."

And she did. Harmony's room was done in a fish theme. The floor looked and felt like sand, and the walls were varying shades of blue with fish swimming from one wall to the other. There were starfish and a squid, lobsters and angelfish, even a few sharks and stingrays amongst others. It was an... interesting aquarium on her sister's walls. She thought about telling Sirius and Remus that they had mixed

freshwater and saltwater sea creatures, but decided not to spoil it for them.

Harry's room, much to his delight, was done in a jungle theme. It was an interesting jungle, to say the least. Monkeys swung from the trees, while lions, tigers, and panthers tackled each other playfully. A sloth hung from the one of the branches near the bed, while tropical birds of all sorts took flight over head. It was strange to see the animals run from one wall to the other, but fascinating just the same. Like in her own room, there was a swing hanging from a painted branch that hung beside his bed, but Harry's had vines hanging down to suspend the wooden board that formed the seat of the swing.

Hermione stood amidst the splendour, feeling as though she were dreaming. She felt a wave of guilt come crashing down on her. All this time, ever since she had gotten the journal, she had been slacking in her duties. It was her responsibility to get the Horcruxes to prevent Voldemort's rise, and she hadn't made any plans to get them other than to train and wait. It was her duty to maintain the peace she had enjoyed.

She watched absently as Sirius pointed to a lion and told Harry that his name was Godric. *I have a great deal of work to catch up on. I've been far too lax a of late. I need to start working more with Harry and start laying plans for getting the cup and the ring, even if I'm not going to go after them for a few years yet.*

"Well are you just going to stand there and stare or are you going to come play? Maybe head back to your room and organize your books, or try out your swing?" Remus asked from beside her, a gentle smile on his face.

Hermione felt herself smile despite her thoughts. "I think I'll go put my books on my shelf," she said with a small grin. "And maybe then I'll try out that swing."

Tomorrow, she promised herself. I'll begin work tomorrow.

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A/N: I know I'm a little late, but I had some family things going on lately, combined with three papers for college, so I've been busy. I'll try to have the next chapter up on Saturday.

For anyone who is interested, *The Little Prince* is one of my favourite books. It's short—the copy I have is barely more than 80 pages, and there are a lot of pictures—but it is very good.

Well, Christmas is over, but the next chapter will have a long overdue chat with the adults on New Years Day. Until next time. Thanks to everyone who read, and special thanks to everyone who reviewed. Please review!

Cheers,

Madm05

Chapter Eighteen: Misfits

Remus Lupin sat quietly, pondering the latest turn in his life. New years Eve turned out to be to be a fairly normal night, for his family, at least. Nymphadora Tonks had come to visit with the occupants of number 12 Grimmauld Place, and the makeshift family played games most of the night to bring in the new year, with Harry and Hermione, the King and Queen of Clue respectively, winning each and every round of said game they played. Harmony had fallen asleep early on, with Harry following soon after. Hermione made it to the midnight mark, before she decided to head off to bed to sleep.

Along with Sirius and Tonks, Remus had followed tradition and made a New Years Resolution. Once, his resolution would have been to find a decent paying job, or to find a better way to lock himself up when he transformed so that no one would be in danger. Now he had not only a job, but also a family to care for. His promise to himself was to be a better father figure for the kids, and to be a better person altogether.

New Years day itself was a cold, crisp day. Snow still covered the ground, and cold, harsh winds still whipped the trees to and fro. It didn't seem to bother the only person who seemed to be awake to watch the sun rise, however.

The werewolf sat beside the fireplace, watching the flames dance before his eyes, thinking about how drastically his life had changed, and the cause of those changes. Occasionally he would look up at the painting of his past hanging over the fireplace, or stroke the pendant hanging around his neck. It was strange for him to think that a mere child could have such a profound impact on the course of his life. But then, Hermione Granger, he had long since decided, was not a normal little girl. Perhaps she was as unusual as Harry Potter was.

They work well together, he thought absently as the fire snapped, crackled and popped. *Harry and Hermione. Those two will do great things one day, I can feel it. If only I could understand them, so I would be able to help them. Both of them are mysteries. I wonder if I will ever understand them, either of them.*

"Sickle for your thoughts?" A voice said from behind him.

Remus turned. "Dora! I didn't think you'd be up this early, not after that little party your favourite cousin threw last night."

Tonks shrugged and sat down across from the werewolf. "It isn't like I drank a bottle of Ogden's, Remus. So, are you going to tell me what you were thinking about?"

The older man sighed. "I was thinking about Harry and Hermione. Again. There's just... I don't know. Something isn't right about Hermione. I've tried not to push it, tried to stop thinking about it, tried to stop understanding her, because I know it won't help. I've tried to rationalize every strange thing I've seen her do, but..." Remus ran his fingers through his hair and sighed. "I can't."

The metamorphmagus nodded her understanding. "I know what you mean. I may not be her guardian, but I've spent enough time with her to realize that she's not your average little kid." Tonks shifted uneasily. "Truthfully, she kind of scares me. She has this... *look* that makes me feel all... I don't know."

"Don't know what? Don't know how to sleep, or how to keep your voices down?" Sirius asked, coming into the room, yawning. "Because I hear potions work great for the first one, and whispering usually does the trick for the second."

"We were talking about the kids. Well, we were talking about the kids, but mostly about Hermione. We don't understand her." Tonks said.

Sirius nodded and sat down in front of the fire, completing the triangle. "Hermione Granger, muggleborn extraordinaire, eh? She's an interesting little thing, isn't she? I admit that I don't understand her anymore than you do."

The others hummed their agreement. "It's not that I think she's evil or anything like that," Tonks began. "But she just doesn't act much like a kid. Granted, I haven't spent a whole lot of time with kids— even when the school is open, I spend most of my time in the Day Care with Harmony and Dawn, but—"

"Dawn?" Sirius asked.

Tonks rolled her eyes. "Yes, Dawn Clearwater, Penny Clearwater's younger sister. She's about a year older than Harmony. You're the headmaster, cousin, you should know these things, shouldn't you?"

Sirius smirked and shrugged. "I should, but that doesn't mean I do."

Sighing dramatically, Tonks turned back to staring at the fire. "I guess the long and short of it, is that she doesn't act anything like a kid." She frowned. "I know that you said it was because she was a Seer. The problem I have with that, is that she acts too mature, even if she does see the future. I know that seeing what will happen will make you grow up quick, but even little kids have to have time to develop. It's like she skipped all of that stuff and went straight to being an adult."

"I know," Remus pinched the bridge of his nose. "But then, it's always seemed to me that she was mature, even for being a Seer. It's like every time I turn around, she's doing something else that I can't explain. It's a bit of a stretch for me to believe that she's a Seer who can see into both the past and the future, possesses a ridiculous amount of raw magical power, has the intelligence and maturity of a woman in her twenties, if not her thirties, can read and understand books on Occlumency and Legilimency, and..." he trailed off and looked back at the fire.

"We've had this little chat before," Sirius said with another shrug. "Really, Moony, I think we should just give up. I mean, there are lots of things about her that bother me, like that calculating look in her eyes when she looks at, well, pretty much anyone."

"And the way she knows everyone's habits," Tonks added.

"And the way she knows just how to help Harry, and those other two boys she tends to play with, Ron Weasley and Neville Longbottom. You know, she is tutoring all three of them, and now they're all three ahead in the class? Not as far as Hermione, of course, but they're all reading bigger words and have even moved on to reading longer sentences than the rest of the kids." Remus pitched in.

Sirius shifted and nodded his agreement. "I have to admit, she is a bit odd—"

“Odd?” Remus looked amazed. “Odd? The girl is like a twenty year old woman trapped in the body of a seven year old! For Merlin’s sake, Padfoot, have you paid *any* attention to the things she does? Consider how she organized her books. First she split them up, muggle and wizarding, then she split them up by subject, then she put them in alphabetical order by the author’s last name! What seven year old girl does that?”

Sirius sighed. “I’m not saying that there isn’t something weird about her, Moony, because there is. I just don’t know what it is, and I don’t think it would be a good idea to push the subject with her. You kept secrets once upon a time, Remus. She’ll tell us when she’s ready. ”

Tonks nodded. “I agree. She doesn’t seem harmful, quite the opposite, in fact. She may have rotten luck, what with her parents dying, then the Malfoy situation and her being poisoned and all of that, not to mention those idiots at the Ministry sending her back to Malfoy manor so soon after her being tortured.”

Remus drew back and winced, visibly hurt by her words. “Please don’t remind me. Hermione is my daughter in all but blood. Honestly, if you imagine me having a daughter, don’t you automatically picture a little girl like Hermione? Somewhat bookish but fiercely loyal to her friends? But just because I love that little girl as if she were my own, doesn’t mean that I don’t know that there is something very strange about her. What do you think, Padfoot?”

Sirius leaned forward, resting his chin in his hands. “I honestly don’t know anymore, Moony. If you ask me, there is something strange about *both* of our kids. I mean, Harry and Hermione... I’ve never met anyone like them before. Of course, part of that could be because they’re Bonded, but—”

“Bonded? No way! They couldn’t possibly be Bonded unless they were married,” Tonks argued.

Remus sighed and rubbed his eyes. “I’m sorry, Dora, we never told you. You know that we made a betrothal arrangement between them, right? Well, we had Harry give Hermione the betrothal ring for Christmas. We must have been feeling sentimental,” he cracked a small smile. “But when he put it on her... there was this glow.” He

shifted slightly. “Typically, when a woman receives the betrothal ring, she is surrounded by a silver glow. Well, when Hermione received her ring, both Hermione and Harry were surrounded by a golden glow— the same glow that surrounds a Bonded couple that is renewing their vows.”

Tonks’ jaw dropped. “The best we can figure,” Sirius continued. “Is that their magic is so powerful that, even though they are so young and it was only pretend, that little wedding they had the night of the ceremony the Ministry threw for us, somehow Bonded them. But of course, that’s just a guess.”

The former auror shifted uncomfortably. “So, what? Does that mean that they are, you know, already in love?”

“Merlin’s beard, no! They’re much too young for that, they’re only children. We, ah, we don’t really know what it means,” Remus answered, a little sadly. “We— Padfoot and I— have never seen or heard of anything like this before. We were going to talk to Professor Dumbledore about it, but I’m sure we’ve bothered him enough as it is. During our spare time we’ve been doing research. I have all of the books on Bonding in the Black family library in my office right now, in fact.”

Tonks frowned. “So what does it mean? Don’t you have any idea? Any at all?”

Sirius hesitated. “Well, the only other thing it could be involves Dark magic, and I can’t see a Dark wizard Bonding Harry to a muggleborn.”

“So our choices are the Dark Arts or little kids binding their souls to each other in a fake wedding, and showing no sign of their Bonding until Christmas?” Tonks snorted. “I don’t buy it. There’s got to be another reason.”

Sirius threw his hands up. “And what would that be? We certainly can’t think of anything.”

“She’s right, Padfoot,” Remus said softly as he gazed pensively into the flames. “Neither one of them showed signs of being Bonded

before Christmas. There was always a deep friendship between them, but nothing that clearly said they were Bonded. There's got to be something else, something that we're missing."

"Okay, since we're playing detective, we might as well do this properly," Sirius said, shifting a little so that he was more comfortable. "Do we have a time frame that we can work from?"

"Well," Tonks began thoughtfully. "I seem to recall that they did act differently after their little pretend wedding. They didn't act like they were really married or anything like that, but they were, I don't know, closer?"

Sirius nodded. "I can accept that. I noticed it too. They could do that thing Lily and James used to do after they had been dating for almost a year, the one where they could talk with each other by looking at each other."

Remus smiled. "They had entire conversations and never said a word." He nodded. "Yes, Harry and Hermione do that. But Lily and James did it too, before they were married."

"But James had already been planning to propose," Sirius added.

"Okay, so we know that Harry and Hermione were doing things that a mature couple are able to do," Tonks frowned. "But they're platonic, aren't they?"

"Platonic love rarely remains so, in my opinion. Frank and Alice Longbottom started out as friends and they fell in love. Ted and Andy were friends at first, too. The Lovegoods started out as friends as well, and now you'd be hard pressed to find a couple more in love than they are," Remus said softly. "Give them time."

Tonks winced. "Now I'm even more confused. You make it sound like a pair of kids were ready to get married."

"Hardly," Sirius said blandly. "There's no romance between them. The very idea is preposterous—they're kids. What I think we're saying, and not very well, mind you, is that is that Harry and Hermione

somehow had a bond— not a marriage Bond— that is reminiscent of the bond a mature couple has when they're engaged."

The young woman was quiet for a moment. "That still sounds wrong."

"Yes," Remus admitted. "But it's the only explanation we have at the moment. So far we've come to the conclusion that, somehow, that little wedding they had at the Ministry created a bond of some sort. They weren't *Bonded* to each other, but a bond was created."

"Strengthened," Sirius said thoughtfully. "The bond was always there between those two. That pretend wedding of theirs strengthened it, I think. The question is *why* did it strengthen their bond."

Tonks hesitated then offered her idea. "Do you think it was because they were pretty much promising to stay with each other? I mean, Harry had been living with his aunt and uncle, if you can call them that, and Hermione had just lost her parents..." She trailed off. "I imagine they'd be lonely, both of them."

Sirius looked thoughtful. "And in a wedding, a very permanent thing here in the wizarding world..."

"...You are essentially promising to never leave your partner," Remus added.

"And promises hold a lot of weight in the wizarding world," Tonks finished with a nod.

"So they started out as little kids— I won't say normal," the werewolf said wryly. "But with a very strong friendship. Then they had a play wedding where they pretty much promised to stay with each other forever..."

"And they essentially became spiritually engaged," Sirius said. "That explains a lot of things, but it doesn't explain the golden glow."

Remus sighed in exasperation. "I can't explain that one. I do know that the bond they have, whether it really is a marriage bond or something else, is much stronger than it was. Now they seem to anticipate what the other wants. The day before yesterday, Hermione

made Harry toast, and Harry made Hermione a cup of tea. Neither asked the other for anything, they just did it. It's a bit creepy to see kids doing that sort of thing."

"So they're kind of married but they're kind of not?" Tonks shook her head. "That doesn't make any sense."

"Nothing about those two makes sense," Sirius said offhandedly.

"Still, I wish they would be able to fall in love on their own," Remus murmured. "If they really are Bonded, they'll never have that chance."

Sirius snorted. "I don't think that matters Moony. Sure, Hermione will never fall in love with, say, Neville Longbottom, but then, he never had a chance, did he? I've seen the way she acts around the other kids, and she always puts Harry first— she always has, even before their little wedding.. I don't think it ever crossed her mind that someone could possibly be more important to her than Harry. It's like she thinks her only purpose in life is to help him.

"And as for Harry, he worships the ground she walks on in his own way. I think he cares more for her than he does for the rest of us combined, and I can't blame him, not really. In his eyes, she's the one that saved him." Sirius looked pensively into the flickering flames, much as Remus had not long before. "I think, even if it is only in the back of his mind, that he feels we abandoned him to the Dursleys.

"But Hermione," Sirius looked up. "I think he feels that Hermione was the one to rescue him, and out of everyone he has met, she has been his one constant, even when the Malfoys had her. You know as well as I do, even if he won't admit it, that the entire time Hermione was gone he was teaching himself to use magic so that he could go save her."

"They're a pair, aren't they?" Tonks asked softly. "It seems like nothing goes right for those two. I've never seen kids with luck worse than what those two have, but they stick it out." She paused. "Together," she added quietly.

The two men nodded. "Yeah, they're a pair, alright. And I'm glad, now that I think on it. Can you imagine what life would be like for either of them if they didn't have each other?" Remus asked.

"I don't know, but I bet they'd be three kinds of miserable." Sirius said.

Tonks raised a slender brow. "Three kinds of miserable?"

Sirius nodded sagely. "Terribly miserable, awfully miserable, and just plain miserable." He looked up. "Honestly? I'm glad they have a bond, no matter what kind it is. At least now I know that neither of them will ever be alone."

Remus and Tonks nodded. "May your words ring true, forever and always, Padfoot. I've become attached to those two, and I don't think I'd like to imagine a world where one of them died in some pointless war. Those are two powerful kids. I don't want to live in a world where one of them went mad from grief over the loss of the other. It would be a dark world, indeed."

Sirius frowned. "Why such grim thoughts, Moony? Is there something you want to tell us about?"

"No, nothing of interest," Remus said with a small smile. "There's a full moon coming up in a few days. I always seem to have dark thoughts around that time. I can't seem to help it." He sighed. "But I do worry about them, both of them." He began to pick absently at his nails.

"I know what you mean, Moony, but I'd give up trying to understand them, if I were you. It will save you the trouble of having to find a headache potion if you just quit trying to explain everything that happens around them." Sirius leaned back and stretched.

"I can't help it," Remus said miserably. "I can't help but think that those two are involved in something big, and that there's nothing I can do about it. Merlin's beard, Sirius, I don't know what I'd do if I lost Harry, Hermione or Harmony. And I'll always have a soft spot for Harry—he's Lily and James' son—but Hermione... she's my Owlet. I never knew someone could like books as much as I do," he snorted. "We're so much alike," he said, more to himself than the others. "And

I can't help but worry that something will happen to her." He began to rub his shoulder absently, his callused fingers touching the scars he still bore from when Fenrir Greyback bit him as a child.

Sirius drew in a deep breath. "I had a lot of time to think while I was in Azkaban, Moony. A lot of time. Most of it I spent thinking about how I'd failed James and Lily and Harry. While I sitting in there rotting," he said, a touch bitter, "I realized something. I've tried to deny it, but in light of this conversation and considering everything that had passed, I have to admit it.

"James told me once that there was a prophecy about Harry. He never really said what the prophecy was about, just that it involved Harry and Voldemort." He paused and looked at his cousin and his brother in all but blood. "It's always going to be Harry," he said softly, the barest trace of bitterness in his voice. "It's going to be Harry who has to stand up and protect everyone. It's always going to be Harry who has to save the day." Sirius gave Remus a grim look. "And now we know, or rather, we think we know, that Harry and Hermione are Bonded. Now we know it's always going to be Harry, and Hermione is always going to be at his side." He swallowed thickly. "Now we know it's always going to be *them*."

"At least they'll have each other," Tonks said, drawing her knees to her chest. "That's more than a lot of people have," she said, trying to offer what comfort she could.

Remus sighed for what he thought may very well have been the thousandth time that night and considered what his friend had told him. "I don't want it to be them," he said softly. "They're just kids. I want them to be normal kids."

"They're not normal kids Remus," Tonks said with an unladylike snort. "Nothing about anyone here is normal. You're a werewolf, Sirius is an innocent ex - convict, Harry is the Boy Who Lived, and Hermione is the Wandless Witch! And who knows what Harmony will be like when she's older, though if I had to guess, I'd say she may very well become the world's greatest prankster. Even your family *dog* is unusual, or are there a lot of canines running around with an Order of Merlin on their collars?

“Whether you like it or not Remus, everyone here is an oddball. I’m just the cousin who won’t go away, and even I’m odd— how many metamorphmagus’ do you know?” She shook her head. “We’re a regular band of misfits, we are.”

The werewolf chuckled mirthlessly. “And I always thought that I was the rational one. I guess the full moon does that to me. I know no one here will ever be normal, Dora, but that doesn’t mean I can’t hope for it.”

“It’s a nice dream,” Sirius nodded. “But it won’t happen. Maybe it will do the kids good to grow up in a house full of misfits.”

Remus nodded. “Maybe it will teach them to be more accepting of other’s differences, and teach them not to judge others. I know that it’s hard to be different, and maybe, just maybe, those two will break the mould and make things better for everyone.”

“I feel bad for them,” Tonks said, absently cracking her knuckles. “Can you imagine what the world will be like for them? Not only are they already famous and likely to have their every move reported by gossip hungry journalists, but they’ve already been judged by everyone. They’ve already been put into nice, neat little boxes by everyone who had met them or read about them, and there isn’t really a way for the kids to change the way people look at them, at least not yet.”

Remus grumbled. “It’s like there’s no hope for them, like they’ll never be free from *themselves*. Those two shouldn’t have to train to use their magic every Sunday while they’re classmates are off spending time with their families and playing games. Hermione shouldn’t have to worry about making the windows shatter every time she’s scared, and Harry shouldn’t have to worry about setting people on fire or something like that!” He drew in a shuddering breath. “I’m sorry, I just—”

“It’s okay, Moony, we understand,” Sirius said calmly. “I know you’re not used to having a lot of people around you who care about you, let alone people that *you* care about.” Tonks gave him an odd look and Sirius went on. “For a long time now, our favourite werewolf felt that because he was a werewolf that he was dangerous. He felt that

anyone who got close to him was at risk. He's gone out of his way to keep people from getting close to him, but every once in a while, someone will strong - arm their way into that fuzzy heart of his."

He gave Remus an intense look. "But since Lily and James died and Harry was taken away, since I was framed, and Wormtail went into hiding, he's been all alone. That is, he was alone until a certain bushy - haired, bucktoothed bookworm entered our world with a bang.

"Hermione wormed her way into his heart, no matter how hard he tried to keep her out, and that's why he's all riled up. As he said earlier, he loves her like she were his real daughter. It's killing him that there are things she will have to face that he can't save her from, especially since he knows first hand how cruel the world can be."

Remus looked away, his face flushed slightly at having his feelings revealed. "It's nothing to be ashamed of, Remus. Merlin knows Harmony has me wrapped around her cute little fingers and I'm not related to her in any way, shape or form."

"And all Harry has to do is say my name and I'm at his beckon call. I owe him that much," Sirius admitted then scoffed. "Listen to us, rambling on like we are. Maybe we should start seeing Madame Alfreda."

The others chuckled. "That reminds me, Sirius, we need to start being more firm with the kids. I guess Madame Alfreda finally had a small breakthrough with the impenetrable wall that is Hermione Granger's mind. It turns out that the kids are teasing her more than she's been telling us. I think she doesn't want the other kids to think of her as a tattle - tail, so she's keeping quiet. We're going to have to catch them in the act."

Sirius nodded and grinned. "Feeling a bit protective of your little bookworm, are you Moony?"

"Oh, leave him alone Sirius, I think it's sweet," Tonks said. Remus flushed a little.

"Do you hear that, Moony? She thinks you're sweet!" Sirius grinned as Remus' face turned red. "So, do you feel better now Moony?"

The werewolf sighed and shrugged a little. "I guess. There are still things that bother me though, things that I want to know."

"Oh, believe me, there are things I want to know too," Sirius said in a dark tone. "For instance, I'd like to know why I have to send my godson back to the people who locked him in a cupboard, I'd like to know why they thought it was a good idea to lock him in a cupboard... there are all sorts of things I'd like to know. That doesn't mean I will. Madame Alfreda isn't permitted to talk about sensitive issues like that, only small things. There are a lot of things I'm not going to know unless Harry tells me, and I don't think he will."

The trio was silent until they heard a loud growling sound. "Sorry," Tonks muttered, her face red. "Guess I'm kind of hungry."

Remus and Sirius laughed softly before Remus stood and offered his hand. "Well, I guess it's about time for us to get breakfast started. Do you think we'll be able to manage without burning anything today?"

Sirius snorted. "Not with our track record. It's pretty bad that our *kids* can cook better than we can."

"Maybe they'll give us lessons," Tonks said with a shrug. The two men gave her a strange look. "What? It was just a suggestion."

The werewolf shook his head. "Hey, I hadn't thought of that." Sirius gave him a strange look. "Not that, Padfoot. I was thinking about Hermione's lessons. I don't think they're very stimulating for her."

"What makes you think that?" Tonks asked. "She loves learning. I thought she'd love her classes."

Remus sighed again and began searching for something to snack on when Woddles appeared. "Something light, please," he asked then turned back to his friends. "Oh, I don't know. Maybe the fact that she spent the last week of class staring at the wood grain on her desk and still answered all of my questions correctly. Or maybe it's the fact that she checks half of the kids' papers — though she usually spends more time checking over Harry's than anyone else's — after she finishes hers which, by the way, she usually completes in about three minutes, sometimes four if it's a lengthy assignment."

Sirius gave his friend a wry grin. "I'm guessing that she's a smart kid, Moony." He took on a mock - thoughtful look. "My, she's like a Mini - Moony!" He grinned at his friend. "I think I'll call her that, from now on."

Remus scowled, though his heart wasn't in it and his eyes were sparkling with amusement. "Oh, don't go picking on my Owlet now!"

Tonks laughed and grew serious again. "Have you considered giving her more advanced lessons? Maybe harder arithmetic problems, and having her read more complicated books than the beginning level books you've got the others reading? It's not really fair to her, if she isn't getting the stimulation she needs. You know it's bad when she goes and looks at everyone else's papers, trying to keep herself busy."

"That's an idea," Remus said, scratching his chin. He turned to Woddles, who was carrying over a tray of breakfast foods. "Thank you," he said kindly. The elf smiled bashfully in return and vanished.

Sirius grabbed a piece of toast and set to work putting marmalade on it. "So, the lessons? I think it would work. The question is, what sort of work will we have her doing, and when? While I don't doubt that she would be able to work well by herself, it wouldn't really be fair to her if we ignored her and made her do the work on her own while we helped the others."

"Yeah, and it's not like she can do calculus or anything like that. I mean, she's smart, but she's seven, she can't be *that* smart." Tonks added.

Remus shrugged and took a drink of tea. "I don't really know. We got her some fairly advanced books for Christmas, and she didn't have any problems with them. I have noticed that she prefers factual books to fiction, though she doesn't seem to mind those books by Charles Dickens and Jane Austen. I usually see her reading something educational. Lately she's taken to reading about some of the various mind magics. For some reason, she's really interested in books about magical links between two people in particular."

Tonks took a noisy bite out of her toast. "You don' fink she thaw the go, d'ya?"

"Dora, I know you're mother knows the proper etiquette for women in our world— surely she taught you *some* table manners," Sirius chided.

The young woman smiled and wiped a few crumbs away from her mouth. "That she did, but it was so traumatizing when I was younger, that I blocked them out of my mind. Now, as I was saying, you don't think she saw the glow, do you? When Harry put the betrothal ring on her finger, I mean."

"Who knows?" Remus shrugged. "She might have, and that might be why she's so interested in links, but she's looking up *everything* to do with links. She's trying to figure out ways they're forged, the side - effects, different types of links, even ways to destroy them, and has been for some time now. I can't think why she's so interested in them."

"The only thing we can do, Moony, is just sit tight for now. I understand what you're saying about everything, from how different Harry and Hermione are to how academically driven Hermione is. There's nothing we can do, not until those kids decide to fill us in on their secrets, or until they slip up and tell us something— it's almost impossible to get either of them to tell something they don't already want to tell you.. I've tried to get Harry to open up, and the only thing I did was make him pull away." He gave a helpless sort of gesture. "Our hands are tied, and there's nothing we can do."

Remus nodded sadly and took a drink of his tea. The three sat in comfortable silence, eating their breakfast and waiting for Harry and Hermione to wake up and join them, and for Harmony to cry and let them know she too was awake.

It wasn't long before Hermione walked into the kitchen. As usual, she was fully dressed and her hair was already combed. She looked like she had been up for some time.

"Morning, Hermione," Sirius smiled from his seat. "Did you sleep well?"

Hermione gave him a small smile as she took her seat at the table. “Wonderfully,” she said in the soft but firm voice he had come to associate with her.

Remus smiled at her briefly before turning back to his own breakfast. He couldn’t help but think she was lying.

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A/N: yes, I know, another information chapter. Not exactly action packed, but this was necessary. I needed to fill you all in on a few things, and I also needed to show that Remus, Sirius and Tonks aren’t blind—they know that there is something strange about Hermione. At this point in time, they’ve had almost half of a year with her, not just a week or so, so their thoughts hold more weight at this point.

A note to anyone who noticed something was wrong with the last chapter: I didn’t realize it, but the chapter didn’t upload correctly the first time around. You may want to go back and reread the end of the last chapter. I believe it ended with ‘ “And I know that you’ve had it rough,” he continued. ’ If the last chapter ended there for you, you may want to go back and finish the chapter.

Before I head off, I want to say that there is nothing “Going On” between Harry and Hermione at this point. I tried to emphasize that there is no romance, that there is only friendship between them at this point. There really is a good reason why their souls are Bonded, and I even hinted at it in the last chapter, but I can’t tell you because that would ruin something that will happen in the second part of the trilogy. They just have a strong friendship.

Well, thank you to everyone who read, and special thanks to everyone who reviewed. If you have any suggestions or comments, please review.

Cheers,

Madm05

Chapter Nineteen: Learning

“Right-o kiddies, this way please.” Jerry Connor was a cheerful man, Hermione realized. And he loved taking walks. Long walks. He had decided it would be a good idea to take all of the kids for a walk through the horse trails, so that everyone would have a general idea of where they were in case something should go wrong. *He could have told us that the trails go in a big circle*, she thought. *We would have understood.*

“He’s rather energetic,” Remus murmured to Sirius.

“I’d say so,” he agreed. “He doesn’t seem to realize that this little nature walk through the horse trails isn’t helping the children get to know the lay of the land at all. I think he just likes the exercise.” Remus nodded, but said nothing.

The group continued on in silence, though many of the kids were panting from walking so much. Neither Harry nor Hermione were very tired, as they often spent every Sunday working to control their powers and often ended up using a great deal of their energy in the process.

The time since Christmas and New Years seemed to fly by for Harry and Hermione. Their break had ended and their rooms were the envy of all of their peers— as was Hermione’s ring. The young witch was shocked to learn that even little girls could be vicious. Though she strongly doubted that many of the girls really understood what marriage meant just yet, it didn’t stop them from being jealous and trying to snag the Boy Who Lived from the Wandless Witch. Unfortunately for them, Harry was unfalteringly loyal.

Sirius and Remus had sworn the two of them to secrecy about being Santa’s elves, saying again that Santa didn’t want anyone to know. Harry, who loved having secrets, had no problem keeping it to himself, whereas Hermione, who had too many secrets already, thought it was annoying to have to keep her little elfish - adventure to herself. Normally, she wasn’t very talkative to begin with, and wouldn’t have told anyone anyways, but having it labelled as a Secret was irritating. *Luckily, it isn’t the sort of thing most people talk about, so as long as I don’t bring it up, I’m okay.*

Lessons were as dreadfully boring as they ever were, but Hermione was dealing with it. Shortly before classes had started back up, Remus had talked to her about doing an accelerated program of sorts, but Hermione had opted to continue on with everyone else when she learned that she would be separated from her peers if she agreed. “I don’t want to be any more different than I already am,” she had said. Remus had given her a sad look, but had agreed nonetheless.

In the end, it was decided that she would attend class with everyone else, but she would do more advanced work. Despite doing the more advanced work, it was still simple for her eighteen year old mind. Still, it would be suspicious of she suddenly started doing the calculus work she was capable of, when her classmates were learning the mechanics of adding single digit numbers together. She couldn’t afford any more suspicion—Remus had already given her an odd look when she completed the decimal worksheet he had given her in record time. She was delighted that her reading was advanced, even if it wasn’t educational—reading Dickens and Austen didn’t bother her in the least, though she was careful not to let her report sound *too* intelligent.

Her music lessons were going wonderfully, and she and Harry were the envy of all of the other children again. Together the two of them were capable of astounding everyone, including Mr. Tonks, their music teacher. Though the two of them found playing scales terribly boring, they loved it when they were able to have a bit of free time to just play whatever struck their fancy.

Learning foreign languages was a slow moving process. Hermione had decided to learn Italian along with Harry, and Russian, just for fun. Of course, being so young, the teachers spent a lot of time focusing on rules for proper grammar and how to hold basic conversation. Though Hermione was not pleased with the pace of the courses, she understood that the teachers could not rush them.

Russian was particularly interesting, because she was learning everything alongside Percy. Percy, of course, had it out for her because she was the one—in his eyes at least—that had lost him his rat. It didn’t help matters that she constantly upstaged him. It was, however, one of her favourite classes, despite her sole classmate in

that course, because it was so different from anything she had ever learned.

She was still trying to convince Sirius and Remus that she could handle learning German and Swedish as well, but the older men seemed reluctant to let her. “We jut don’t want you to bite off more than you can chew, Hermione,” Remus had said. “You’re still young, yet. Relax a little.” She had nearly told them that she had handled using a time turner in third year just fine, but stopped herself before she said anything damaging.

Hermione had managed to convince Harry to take Latin. It was a difficult language to learn, but Hermione was sure that learning Latin would help Harry immensely when the time came for them to go to Hogwarts. She only hoped that he wouldn’t confuse the Latin with the Italian. She knew that, when she first started learning other languages in the first timeline, she had mixed up French and Spanish several times at first. Hopefully Harry wouldn’t have that difficulty.

Keeping her promise to herself, Hermione had begun planning how to go about getting the Horcruxes, particularly when to destroy them—she was planning on ‘discovering’ the Room of Requirement at Hogwarts in first year and getting rid of them then— and planning on what else to teach Harry in regards to wandless magic. She was surprised at how difficult planning her discovery was— she had to work in a way to ‘discover’ the Philosopher’s Stone, Nicholas Flamel, keep Harry safe, and find a way to stumble upon the Room of Requirement. It was a thankless task, but one she planned to perform, regardless. It was her duty. Much like it was Harry’s duty to defeat Voldemort.

“Okay,” Mr. Connor said, turning back to the kids. “Now, we’ve been through the trails, so we know where we’ll be going when we finally take the horses out. Our esteemed headmaster purchased twenty horses and fifteen ponies for us to learn how to ride on. I recommend the older kids take the horses and let the littler ones have the ponies.” Hermione glanced at Harry then looked at the barn. Heaving a sigh, she took off, Harry at her side.

Remus shuffled over to where Sirius was standing. “Five galleons says Hermione picks the ugliest thing on four hooves in that barn.”

Sirius looked thoughtful and shook his head. “*Ten* galleons says she picks the meanest thing in that barn.”

“You’re on,” Remus said with a grin, then turned to see what horse, or pony, Hermione would choose.

“Men,” Andromeda Tonks muttered. She and her husband set off to wander around the barn and check on the children.

Meanwhile, inside the large barn, Hermione began to look for a pony, or maybe a horse, to ride. Draco, she noticed, had chosen what looked to be a very vain horse, if horses could be vain. Harry was admiring a white horse. Hermione sighed, wishing she knew more about horses. So far the only thing she knew about horses was that they had hooves and people could ride on them. Unfortunately, horseback riding was something she had never learned about in the first timeline, and there were no books on horses in the Black family library.

She looked at all of the ponies, then at all of the horses, but couldn’t find one that suited her. She was ready to just give up, sneak away and go read a book when she heard something like a horse snorting. She turned and looked at the horse— and there was no mistaking the horse for a large pony— and was shocked to say the least.

It was a large, grey horse with two white socks and white patches that looked like it had seen many unpleasant days. At one point, the horse had likely been white, but time had caused his coat to grey out. Despite being large, he was a very skinny horse, and looked to have been starved— it appeared he was only beginning to gain weight back. Across his back and along his sides were several scars, signs of past mistreatment. There were scabs on his ears, likely from flies, and his mane and tail were scraggly looking. He had an unpleasant air about him, like he was going to bite or kick anyone who dared come close.

“I wouldn’t recommend him,” Mr. Connor said, coming up from behind her. “He doesn’t like too many people, and he isn’t very pleasant to

begin with. Been mistreated pretty badly, I was going to put him in another barn, but didn't have time to move him. He was an extra horse, thrown in just to get rid of him. I figured I could rehabilitate him eventually, but he doesn't seem up for it. He doesn't even have a name. Not to mention he's an ugly thing."

"I think he's gorgeous," Hermione replied. Mr. Connor and Oliver Wood, who was admiring the horse next to the one Hermione had chosen, gave her a strange look. Even the horse himself looked at her like she was crazy. "What do you say, hmm? Do you want to be mine? I'll take very good care of you, I promise," she crooned, reaching out to pet him on the nose. He lowered his head to let her touch him. Hermione smiled at him. "Yes, you're so handsome, aren't you? Yes you are." The horse looked at her with what could only be described as amusement. "You, my handsome friend, are going to need a name."

Mr. Connor shook his head and walked away to check on the other kids. "Mental, that one. Picks the ugliest brute in the barn, and coos over how handsome he is."

A short while later, all of the children were learning about how to groom their horses, and ponies for many of the girls, when Sirius and Remus decided to see who won their wager.

"Jerry, old friend, you wouldn't happen to know what kind of horse or pony Hermione chose, would you?" Sirius asked.

The other man snorted. "Picked a real winner, she did. An Arabian horse. Good breed, Arabians, even if they are on the expensive side— they're intelligent, spirited, and have lots of stamina. Of course, it's a wizarding horse, so he's bound to be more intelligent and have more stamina than those horses muggles ride." He sighed. "The only problem is that the horse she chose is the ugliest thing I've ever seen."

Sirius groaned as Remus snorted with laughter. "And Harry? What kind did Harry choose?" Remus asked as Sirius handed him the galleons.

"A thoroughbred," he grinned. "And a rare but beautiful one, at that—there aren't too many white thoroughbreds. She won plenty of races in her prime, but came up lame last year, and can't race anymore. Her name is Gloria. She's a good horse for him, I think. I would rather have the younger ones learning to ride on the ponies, but I did say I'd let them pick."

Remus nodded his approval. "You'll make sure the kids don't just take off, right? I don't want Harry or Hermione to get hurt, and with the horses they chose..." He trailed off. "Granted, I didn't think either of them would choose to ride a pony. I just guess I thought they'd take something smaller... and slower."

"No such luck, Moony," Sirius said. "Oh look, there's Harry." The three turned to look at the young boy beaming back at them.

"Can I keep her? Please?" He asked, his emerald eyes shining with hope as he rubbed the mare's white neck.

"We'll see," Sirius said evasively. "Where's Hermione at, Harry?" Hermione was always good for a distraction when it came to Harry.

"She's three stalls down that way," he said, pointing to his left. Sure enough, there she was, gushing over a rather unpleasant looking horse.

"Gah, is that even a horse?" Remus asked.

Mr. Connor nodded. "Like I told the little Lupin," he said with a smile. "He's not very pleasant. He was abused pretty badly though, and it's turned him away from most people. He seems to like her just fine, though. Actually, he's the meanest horse we have, so it's amazing that he likes her as much as he does. I was going to put him somewhere else so that he didn't bite anyone, but we didn't have anything that could keep him from running off, and I didn't have the time or energy to conjure anything."

Remus sighed and handed Sirius' galleons back. "Looks like a tie, Padfoot. I didn't count on the ugliest horse being the meanest."

"I didn't either." Sirius sighed mournfully. "Our Hermione seems to have a penchant for hard luck cases. That's why I figured she'd go for something mean— it probably wouldn't have been treated well."

"That's why I picked something ugly— I thought she'd go for something that probably wouldn't be liked by everyone else." Remus shrugged. "Oh well."

Sirius nodded sagely. "I think that's why she likes us so much— ex - convict, werewolf, Boy Who Lived." He looked thoughtful for a moment. "Do you ever wonder why she likes hard luck cases like us so much?"

Remus shook his head. "No idea, but I'm glad she does, and I think I'll make it a point to stay on her good side. She may be a kid, but as I've been saying for a while now, there's something unusual about her."

The two men shrugged and began to wonder around, looking at the horses that each of the others had selected to learn to care for and to ride. "So, are we going to let the kids keep their horses?" Remus asked at last.

"I don't know." Sirius said, reaching out to pet Hermione's chosen horse as he walked by. The horse seemed to be affronted by Sirius' attention, and tried to bite him. He jerked back. "Why you vicious little—"

"Isn't he wonderful?" Hermione asked, coming up from behind. The two men turned to see the little girl carrying a comb and a brush to learn how to properly groom a horse. "Mr. Connor said he doesn't have a name, because his former owners were very cruel to him, so I've decided to name him Archimedes. It's a good name for him, don't you think?" She asked, walking up to the horse.

"Hermione, he bites, don't get too—" Archimedes lowered his head and gently nudged her. Smiling, Hermione set down her grooming equipment and began to rub his nose. "Attached," Sirius finished lamely. "I mean, these are school horses, they're not for you to keep."

“Oh,” Hermione said softly before focusing all of her attention on Archimedes.

Remus frowned at Sirius. “Maybe we’ll be able to set it up so that you can take care of him, not just for class, but like he was really yours,” Remus offered.

“Maybe,” she said quietly.

Remus was about to say something more when Mr. Connor stood up and cleared his throat. “Right, now I’m going to show you all how to saddle a horse, though you will need help as the saddles are quite heavy. After that, I’ll show you all how to mount your horses, or ponies.” With that, he clapped his hands once and set to work showing each child how to properly saddle a horse.

Hermione, meanwhile, had gone inexplicably pale. She waited patiently alongside Archimedes until Mr. Connor came around and showed her how to put a saddle and bridle on her horse. Sirius and Remus, who had decided to let the other man do his job and teach the eighteen students— those who were six and older— how to ride, noticed Hermione’s odd behaviour, but said nothing.

Once all of the horses and ponies that had been selected were saddled and ready to go, the students were shown how to mount properly. Hermione hesitated and continued to stand beside Archimedes. “I— I’m fine down here, thanks.” She said at last.

Remus gave his adopted daughter a strange look. “Hermione, you seemed pretty excited about learning how to ride earlier. What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” she said quickly and shifted uncomfortably. “I... I’m just... well you see I... well...”

“What’s wrong?” Remus asked, kneeling beside her, setting a comforting hand on her shoulder.

“I’m... I don’t like heights,” she said quietly, her face flushed with embarrassment.

Remus nearly fell over. “Hermione, you fly without a broom on a regular basis, not to mention that right now, you can fly faster than your horse can run. There’s nothing to be afraid of.”

“Nothing to be afraid of!” She shrieked, drawing everyone’s attention. “I could fall! I could be thrown if Archimedes gets spooked! I could fall and break my neck and die!” By the end of her tirade, Hermione looked fairly ill, as though she were about to faint.

“Hermione,” Remus began soothingly. “I promise, you won’t get hurt.” The werewolf leaned down closer to her. “And even if you do fall, you can fly, remember? You can use your wandless magic,” he whispered to her.

The young girl became even more panicked. “But what if I’m not expecting to fall, then I do, and I don’t have time to use my magic because I’m in a state of shock, and I—”

“Calm down,” the older man said quietly, still trying to calm the hysterical girl.

Hermione swallowed and tried to calm herself. *I can fly*, she thought. *Remus is right, I can fly. There’s no reason for me to be afraid from heights... unless you count the fact that I could be thrown off and break my neck because Archimedes didn’t know I didn’t have a good grip, and I didn’t have the time to react.* Hermione swallowed again—she wasn’t helping her situation any. She looked up at the horse standing calmly behind her. He seemed docile enough, but then, she had seen him try to bite no less than four people so far. “Okay,” she said eventually.

Remus smiled gently at her and helped her into the saddle. *Words cannot describe how much I really don’t like this*, Hermione thought as she clung to the saddle horn. *This is worse than riding on Buckbeak. At least then I had Harry. I know he’d never let me fall.* She glanced over the side of her horse and squeaked. *Oh, I really, really, don’t like this, not at all. Why can’t I just walk Archimedes?*

She was gripping the saddle horn for dear life when she felt a comforting hand on her shoulder. “I’m afraid of small places,” Harry said softly in her ear. Hermione immediately felt herself relax and

even smiled a little when she understood that he was trying to offer her comfort by letting her know it was alright to be afraid. She turned and looked at her friend, giving him a nod. Harry smiled in return and sat more comfortably on his horse. “I think I’m getting the hang of it,” he grinned.

Hermione grinned back, more than a little relieved to have something to distract her. “You’re a natural, there’s no doubt about it. You’re just good at everything you do— riding, Quidditch, playing the piano...”

“You’re better at everything else,” he said with a bashful smile. “I wish I was as smart as you are, Hermione.”

“You *are* smart Harry,” she said earnestly. “You just, well, I mean your Aunt and Uncle didn’t exactly help you learn anything, did they? My parents made learning easy for me— they gave me all sorts of books and everything. You’ll catch up to me in no time at all, I’m sure of it.”

“Okay kiddies, now that you know the basics, we’ll head out!” Mr. Connor said cheerfully.

Snap! I wasn’t paying attention! Okay, deep breaths. I’ll just do what everyone else is doing. Unfortunately, everyone seemed to be doing something different. Some kids were holding reins, while others were holding the saddle horn. Some were digging their heels into the horses or ponies they were riding, and others were tugging on the reins. All in all, she had no idea what she was doing. *Oh dear.*

“Giddy-up?” She said unsurely to Archimedes. “Go horsy, go?” Hermione sighed in frustration. “I need help,” she muttered. “I wish I knew something about horses,” she grumbled quietly, before digging her heels into the side of the horse like she saw some of the others doing. Archimedes made an agitated noise but began to move. Horseback riding, Hermione decided, was rather pleasant. No sooner had she begun to enjoy her very short ride out of the barn did fate throw yet another twist her way.

Archimedes spotted a rather large snake.

The large horse reared back, nearly throwing his young rider. Hermione, terrified, wrapped her small arms around his neck and held on for dear life as the horse took off. Archimedes leapt over the fence meant to keeping him and the others from running off and dashed into the forest beyond. *I'm going to die!*

"Hermione!" She heard someone yell. Still clinging to Archimedes, she managed to push herself up a little despite her bumpy ride and glance behind her. It was Harry. How he had managed to stay atop the mare he was riding, she didn't know, but she hadn't been so relieved to see her dearest friend since the time he had popped into Malfoy Manor in a blaze of glory. *I'm not going to die!*

Dimly, she was aware that others were riding towards them, but none of them mattered— Harry was coming. It didn't matter that he was only six years old, because she had absolute faith in their friendship. He was her tried and true friend, and she trusted him.

"Slow down, Hermione!" She heard Harry call.

How do I slow down?! "Erm, stop Archimedes!" She gasped as the horse was still running at a full gallop, jostling her painfully. Oddly, he seemed to understand what she was saying and did slow down before he eventually came to a stop. "Well, if I'd known it was that easy... I'm glad I didn't name you Courage," she muttered. "Or I'd never live it down."

"Are you okay, Hermione?" Harry asked, bringing his mare to a stop beside her.

"I'm fine," she mumbled, a little jealous of the ease Harry showed in horseback riding. *It may have helped if I had been paying attention. Of all of the times for me to let my mind wander.* Looking for a distraction, Hermione glanced down to see Archimedes grazing peacefully alongside Gloria, Harry's mare.

"I told you that I was going to need trained assistants. There were too many kids to deal with, even without the kids who were five and younger. I should have had no less than three assistants to help me with the kids," Mr. Connor was saying as he, Sirius and Remus rode up.

“Now Jerry, how was I to know that a *snake* was going to show up out of nowhere? No one could have guessed that a snake was just going to show up, or that my godson was just going to take off after Hermione,” Sirius defended. “Besides, I thought that Ted, Andy, Remus and I would be more than enough help.”

“There is a difference between knowing how to ride and knowing how to *teach* others to ride!” Mr. Connor scowled.

Remus snorted at the last remark and clumsily slid out of the saddle and stumbled to the kids. “Hermione, Harry, are you two alright?” He asked, pulling Hermione unceremoniously off the horse and holding her close before reaching out to touch Harry, as if to reassure himself that the young boy was whole.

“Can we do that again?” Harry asked excitedly. “Not that part where Hermione was scared and screamed, the part where Gloria got to jump over the fence! That was fun!”

“Harry, my boy,” Sirius said, pulling his godson down from the mare and held him much like Remus was holding Hermione. “You are too much like your father, so no, you can’t do that again.” Harry looked decidedly crestfallen, but nodded.

“What are we going to do, Sirius?” Mr. Connor asked. “We need to have those snakes exterminated,” he said, trying to grab Archimedes’ reins, but failing as the horse tried to bite him every time he got close.

“No!” Harry said, his eyes wide with panic. “Misstessah didn’t mean to scare anyone, honest! She wouldn’t do that!”

Hermione mentally kicked herself— how could she have forgotten Harry was a Parselmouth? Harry didn’t know that it wasn’t considered a good thing that he could speak with snakes, and wouldn’t know to keep quiet, especially in front of Mr. Connor. She did the only thing she could think of doing.

“Spider!” She shrieked, squirming in Remus’ arms and kicking Archimedes. The large horse was off again at full speed. Distantly, she heard Mr. Connor cursing and mounting his horse to take off after the Arabian stallion.

“Hermione,” Remus frowned. “There’s no spider.”

“Later Moony,’ Sirius said, looking back to the young boy. “Who is Misstessah, Harry? What are you talking about?”

Harry gave Sirius a bewildered look. “Misstessah. She’s the snake that scared Hermione’s horse, but she didn’t mean to scare him, she’s really nice. I met her a few days ago, when Hermione was in her Russian class. She told me all about her home, and how I was the only human she had ever talked to,” he said proudly.

“Talked?” Sirius asked weakly. “She *talked* to you?” Remus, meanwhile, had looked down at Hermione, who bravely met his eyes.

Harry nodded. “Yes. She said she wanted to see me again. She said that most of the snakes around here left many years ago, because they weren’t welcome anymore, but she said she would never leave her home. She said there were only three of her kind left here, but she hates Sahsika. They’re rivals, you see, for Narsuss.” Harry paused. “Snakes love to gossip. Did you know that Sahsika kept lying to Narsuss to get him to leave Misstessah, and stay with her? The nerve!” He huffed in a manner reminiscent of Hermione.

Hermione would have laughed if the situation wasn’t so serious. “Fascinating,” she said instead.

“Harry,” Sirius hesitated. “You can talk to snakes?” Harry nodded. “And you understand them?” Harry nodded again. Sirius sighed and ran his hand through his hair. He looked around the forest surrounding them, seeming to search for answers with in the limbs of the trees. “Listen Harry,” he said solemnly, kneeling down by the young boy. “That’s a secret, okay? You can’t tell *anyone* that you can speak to snakes, alright?”

“Why?” Harry asked, frowning. “I was going to show my friends to Misstessah, and Misstessah was going to show me to Narsuss today.”

“You can show Hermione to them, Harry, and Misstessah can still show you to Narsuss, just not around anyone else,” Sirius offered.

“Harry,” Remus said, kneeling beside his friend and the boy who was very much like a nephew to him. “It’s like how you can fly,” he continued, letting Hermione wriggle out of his arms to stand by her friend. “Only you can talk to snakes Harry, so it’s like how you don’t need a wand to move things, and how you don’t need a broom to fly. It’s a secret.”

Harry nodded his understanding before he looked at Hermione. “You knew?” Hermione nodded slowly, more than a little nervous. Would Harry be upset that she didn’t tell him about his ability? “That’s why you sent Archimedes away? So that Mr. Connor would follow him and wouldn’t find out?” Again, she nodded. Harry gave her a small smile. “Thanks,” he said softly.

Hermione was flooded with a strong sense of warmth and relief. “You’re very welcome,” she replied just as softly.

“Well,” Sirius said. “I think it’s time we got back. We left Ted and Andy with sixteen kids to look after, so they’re probably going half mad after that stunt the two of you pulled, even if you didn’t mean to. And remember Harry— this is a secret.”

“Can I till show you to Misstessah? She really wants to see you,” Harry said, looking hopeful.

Sirius hesitated. “We’ll just have to wait and see Harry, okay? I don’t know if you’ll be able to or not, it all depends on what happens. I may be pretty busy soon, since two of my charges were carried off by horses.”

“I’m sorry,” Harry said, his shoulders slumping a little.

“It wasn’t your fault Harry,” Remus reassured the young boy. “You couldn’t do anything to stop it, and you were trying to do the right thing by helping Hermione. Just next time, why don’t you let the adults handle it, okay?”

Harry nodded, but Hermione could tell he didn’t agree. Harry didn’t believe that adults could do anything right. He would never admit it, but Hermione knew he blamed Sirius for holding him back when

Malfoy Senior took her away, and that he blamed all of the adults for not rescuing her sooner.

"I've got him!" The group turned to see Mr. Connor fruitlessly trying to get Archimedes to move. The horse was stubbornly refusing. Suppressing a smile, Hermione jogged up to the Arabian horse, glad he was back. As she approached, the horse seemed to give her a wary look, clearly saying 'don't do that again'.

"I'm ever so sorry, Archimedes," she soothed as she walked closer and began to stroke his nose. "I panicked. I won't hurt you ever again, I promise. Do you want to go back to the barn? I think we've had enough excitement for the time being."

"How did you do that?" Mr. Connor asked, quite amazed. He stood between his horse, Misty, and Archimedes with a stunned look on his face. "I fought the whole time to get him *this* far. I found him over there," he nodded to a small, nearby pool of water. "And it took me this long to get him here. Amazing how you can do that when he tries to bite just about everyone who comes near him."

Hermione shrugged. She certainly didn't want to tell him about how she had been drawn to her Archimedes from the start. It would make her feel foolish to say that he reminded her of herself— a horse with a broken past being given a second chance.

"Oh well. Here, I'll help you up, then I'll let you ride back." Mr. Connor reached down to help her into the saddle, all the while muttering that if he had only had more assistants, than this wouldn't have happened. "I might as well use this as a chance to teach you a few things. You're a smart girl, and I know you'll teach your brother—"

"Harry's not my brother," Hermione said firmly, showing him her ring. "He's my betrothed." She didn't know why it was so important that he understood that, but it was. All she could say for sure was that it turned her stomach that *anyone* would think of her as Harry's sister, and she knew that Harry was just as appalled at the thought as she was.

"Sorry," he said, raising his hands in mock defeat. "Didn't mean nothing by it. I was just saying that you and Harry are so close that

you'll probably show him everything I show you, and it will just make my job that much easier."

Hermione nodded, not really paying attention until he began to show her the basics of riding. Once they set off, Hermione was lost in thought. She wondered why she was so defensive about her engagement to Harry. Come to think of it, she had become more defensive around Christmas. She glanced down at the band on her left ring finger and wondered, distantly, if there was something more about the ring than she had been told.

Alas, it was a research project for another day.

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A/N: My sincerest apologies, everyone. It would seem that was having a few technical difficulties—there was a problem with my account. Then I had work and homework from my college classes. This is the soonest I was able to update. On the good side, next chapter will bring a change of scenery...and the Dark Harry. Well, thanks to everyone who read, and special thanks to those who reviewed. Please review!

Cheers,

Madm05

Chapter Twenty: Shift

Sirius Black considered himself an easy - going man. He liked to pull pranks, and he liked to fly on his broom, and he loved to play games with his godson Harry. But there were times when he drew the line, and could become a cold, callus man who was unafraid to use the mannerisms his family taught him when he was younger to intimidate others. There were certain people, like Severus Snape, that could bring out the cold, callus man he tried to hide from his godson and his best friend's adopted daughters. The Dursleys, however, were an awful lot like Severus Snape, and they brought out the worst in him.

Sirius would have preferred to be playing Clue with Harry and Hermione, even if it meant being beaten royally. Secretly, he planned to practice while they were away so that *he* could win for once, and wipe those mock - innocent looks off of their faces. He didn't want to be at Number four Privet Drive, but he was.

It was eight o'clock in the evening, the day before his school would be closing for summer break. Sirius paused at the foot of the drive, remembering the last time he had come to this place, Hermione walking calmly beside him... then Hermione opening the cupboard under the stairs to reveal a frightened little boy that Sirius couldn't believe was his Harry. He gritted his teeth and walked up the drive and knocked firmly on the door. He had a mission to complete.

Blood wards, Sirius scoffed. *We don't even know if those things really work.* He smiled grimly as he heard a voice call out "Just a minute!" He didn't want to send Harry to the Dursleys every year, but that didn't mean that he couldn't at least make sure Harry wasn't mistreated while he was here. He wasn't completely without influence.

The door opened. "How may I he— Ah!" Petunia Dursley shrieked and jumped back in fear. "You! What are you doing here!"

"Petunia, who is— you!" Vernon snarled as he appeared behind his wife.

"Yes, me, but generally I go by Sirius. *You*, however, may address me as Mr. Black," he said, drawing himself up to his full height, a

rather impressive sight. “I have a few things I need to discuss with you. May I come in?”

Vernon’s face started to turn an interesting shade of puce as he began to sputter. “N-no you may not enter my household!” He snarled. “A freak like you has no business trying to ruin the lives of decent, *normal*, people. I demand you leave at once!”

Sirius had to mentally restrain himself from attacking the other man. He remembered all too well Harry’s words earlier that day. After dinner, Sirius and Remus explained to Harry that he would have to stay at the Dursleys for an entire month. Harry had asked in a broken voice if he had been bad and was being punished. Harry had known for some time that he would need to spend time at the Dursleys, but he hadn’t known that he would be gone full month. That he would consider a month with his maternal relatives punishment spoke volumes to Sirius.

Instead, Sirius grinned easily and shrugged before subtly flicking his wand—which he had drawn unnoticed when Vernon began his tirade. Slipping his wand away, he casually reached out and grabbed the collar of the beefy man’s shirt and lifted him into the air. “I really think we should take this inside, don’t you?” He asked, walking forward, still holding Harry’s uncle in the air. As he kicked the door shut behind him, he dropped the rotund muggle, his easygoing demeanour disappearing.

“Let’s talk,” he said darkly, drawing on all of the Pureblood Superiority lessons his family literally beat into him as a child. “I think we need to have a chat, *Vermin*,” Sirius spat. “About the way you’ve been treating my Godson. You see, I’ve been able to spend some time with Harry over the past few months, and I’ve reached a few startling conclusions. The first being that he is disturbing talented for a child—I’ve never met anyone quite as good at cooking and cleaning as he is—amazing, isn’t it?”

The older Dursleys began to cower. Dudley, who hadn’t looked away from the television, hadn’t noticed his parents’ plight.

“Another interesting... *conclusion*... that I’ve come to is that my godson is far too small for his age. I can’t help but think that you

locking him in a *cupboard* just *might* be the reason,” he hissed, towering over the quaking couple.

“Now, because I’m a sporting fellow, I’m going to give you one last chance,” he looked down his nose at them. “Harry will be returning here for about a month or so. You *will* treat him well, and just to be sure, I’m sending along Hermione. You remember her, don’t you? She was the little girl that came with me last time.”

Petunia, still shivering with fear, whimpered. “W-w-w—”

“When?” Sirius asked. “They’ll be here in two days, at noon. I expect *both* of them to have a room, and I expect them to be treated well.” Sirius bared his teeth in a fierce snarl, a habit he had picked up from his animagus form. “And if I so much as *think* you are making Harry and Hermione do chores while that beached whale you call a son sits on his duff all day, by my wand, you will regret having crossed me.”

“Now see here,” Vernon sputtered, trying to regain control. “My sister Marge is coming to visit for a late birthday party for Dudley. I won’t have room for them. They’ll only eat the food off our table and offer nothing in return anyways. You’d better keep them, or just send the boy.”

“No,” Sirius sneered. “I’ll send them both, because I don’t think you’re smart enough to believe me when I tell you that I’ll flay you alive with a butter knife if you hurt either Harry or Hermione. You will simply have to *make* room for them.” Satisfied, Sirius turned away. “Just remember. Two days.” And with that, he was gone with a sharp crack.

Dudley, who hadn’t noticed a thing, shoved a handful of sugary snacks into his mouth, his eyes still glued to the television.

Hermione groaned lightly and closed the lid of her trunk. *I don’t want to do this*, she thought. She bit her lip and sighed heavily, taking in a final glance around her room and enjoying the beautiful scenery. It was going to be the last time she would see it for a month.

She sighed heavily and ran her hand through her bushy hair, a habit she had picked up from her 'Papa Remus and Uncle Sirius'. Her quest to discover anything about betrothal rings had been fruitless thus far. She couldn't find a single book in the library about it, though she was sure that she had seen them in there before. *Perhaps Papa Remus took them because he didn't think it was appropriate reading material for kids.* Unable to find any of the books on betrothal, she returned the task she had been working on long before— trying to find a way to keep Voldemort from learning anything through his link to Harry.

Much to her frustration, many of the books she had been using as sources of information had vanished alongside the other books on betrothals and bonds. It was frustrating to no end, especially since she couldn't ask Sirius or Remus for the books without giving too much away. As it was, she was making a list of reference books for the next time she had a chance to buy books without someone looking over her shoulder. She wanted to learn as much about the connection between Harry and Voldemort before their first year.

So far her search had been fruitless in that respect as well. She couldn't find anything even remotely like the link between Harry and the Dark Lord. There were dozens of ways to form links, such as a marriage Bond— which was only briefly mentioned in each book— as well as bonds of servitude, much like the links between house - elves and their masters, and even links forged from casting ancient rituals in a group. The list was endless, but alas, nothing even remotely similar to the link between Harry and Voldemort could be found.

Hermione swept her eyes around the room, checking to be sure that she had everything she would need to take with her. She was going to miss her room. After having gone without books for long stretches of time while hunting for Horcruxes, Hermione didn't have a problem with leaving her books behind. Rather, she didn't want to leave her haven— the otters and the stag that played in the woods, and the rabbits that hopped about. They were comforting, and she didn't want to give them up now that she had them.

Though Hermione was glad she could go with Harry to the Dursleys— for more reason than one— she was unsure whether it

was the right decision for Remus to make. Though she had gotten better at keeping her magic from acting up, she unsure of her control while living with the people who dared to abuse her dearest friend. That was not the only cause for worry— Harry was improving daily with his control over his wandless magic, and there was no telling what he would do if he were to get riled up. She wasn't worried about the Dursleys, far from it. She was concerned that Harry would get into trouble for giving them exactly what they deserved; *a good swift kick in the—*

"Are you ready to go, Owlet?" Remus asked from her doorway.

The young witch sighed and looked at him. "Yes, I'm ready. I wish we didn't have to go though. I don't particularly care for Harry's Aunt and Uncle, or his cousin, for that matter."

"Do you want to stay here?" The older man asked softly. "You don't have to go, you know. We'll understand if you don't want to go to the Dursleys. I know they're not very nice people," he offered.

Hermione frowned. "I'm not going to abandon Harry," she said firmly as she turned back to her trunk, not seeing the werewolf wince. "He's my best friend, and I'm certainly not going to make him deal with those horrible people all on his own!" She grabbed the handle of her trunk and turned back to her adopted father. "Okay, I'm all ready to go."

Remus nodded, more to himself than to her, before stepping forward and grabbing her trunk. "I'll take this, Owlet. You go on ahead. I think Harry could use some encouragement."

Hermione nodded in reply before setting off down the hall to Harry's room. Sure enough, the young wizard was sitting on his bed, staring blankly at the marmosets swinging in the branches on his walls. "Harry?" She called out to him softly, almost afraid to disturb him.

He turned frighteningly empty eyes on her. "I don't want to go," he said softly.

She sighed heavily and trudged into his room. "I don't either," she replied truthfully. "But we have to, Harry," Hermione said, resting her

hand on his shoulder. "It's something that we have to do. And you know Madame Alfreda says that you'll have to face them some time— she told me the same thing, so don't lie. Of course, facing kids my own age is very different from what you have to do, but Harry," she gently grabbed his hand and squeezed it comfortingly. "We can do this. I'll be with you the whole time. *You* can do this." Hermione leaned towards him, looking into his emerald eyes. "I have faith in you, Harry."

Harry gave her a small smile and sat up straighter on his bed before sliding down. "Thanks Hermione. I guess we have to go. I'm glad you're coming with me though. Are you ready?"

Hermione felt a surge of satisfaction with the decision that she had made to stand by Harry. "Yes, I'm ready. Let's go."

The pair left Harry's room and joined the hustle and bustle of the other children greeting their parents enthusiastically in the main entrance hall. Harry reached out and grabbed her hand, both offering and taking comfort since neither of them really had a parent waiting for them, with the exception of their adopted fathers. Sharing a smile, they went out to say goodbye to their friends.

When at last they bid farewell to the last of the students and their parents, Remus and Sirius led Harry and Hermione out to a car parked on the side of the road. "Are you sure I can't bring my piano?" Harry asked wistfully while Remus loaded their trunks into the car.

Sirius chuckled mirthlessly. "I don't think that will go over very well with your aunt and uncle," he said as he sat in the passenger side seat. "But I want you two to remember that—"

"If the Dursleys do anything bad to us, we are let you know immediately." Harry and Hermione chimed in perfect harmony. The pair grinned at each other as Remus chuckled from behind the wheel of the car and drove off, Harry and Hermione waving to Tonks and Harmony through the rear window.

"Why are we driving?" Harry asked. "Why don't we use a portkey?"

"We can't use a portkey or floo or anything like that Harry," Sirius began. "Since your aunt and uncle are muggles and live in a muggle area. It will look mighty strange if the two of you suddenly show up. The muggles need to see you arrive the way muggles do things."

"Then why didn't you drive to pick me up the first time?" Harry asked, curious.

Sirius flushed as Remus snorted. "Well, I didn't think you'd be coming back so I didn't really think it would matter if you suddenly vanished for no apparent reason."

Harry nodded his acceptance and stared out the window, watching as the trees seemed to fly by. The rest of the ride passed in much the same fashion. Sirius and Remus tried to start several conversations, but each ended up dwindling as neither Harry nor Hermione really wanted to talk.

The ride, though it should have lasted for a while, passed far too quickly for the silent occupants of the car. Soon, they pulled into number four of Privet Drive. Nosy neighbours peaked out of their windows while the other children, not as subtle as their parents, stared openly. Hermione sighed. *Wonderful. More people to stare at us.*

Exiting the car, they found a stony - faced Petunia waiting for them in the doorway. "Well, come on then," she said sharply and turned back into her house.

Harry and Hermione shared a look and shrugged before reaching for their trunks. Sirius and Remus beat them to it, and indicated that they would be carrying the trunks for them. The pair looked up at the pristine house before them. Taking strength in each other's presence, they slowly walked up to the door.

As they walked, Hermione briefly wished she had been able to talk more with Madame Alfreda before coming to the Dursleys—the woman had helped Hermione in ways the young witch had never thought possible; Hermione certainly never thought that she would have so many unresolved issues from being teased so much when she was younger. Surprisingly, the young girl now had much better

control over her emotions, having dealt with several of her more painful memories. Regardless, Hermione wasn't sure she'd be able to hand facing Harry's tormentors without taking a page out of the Dark Harry's book and doing something highly illegal.

They crossed the threshold into number four. The house had changed very little since the last time either child had been there—the only difference was found in the pictures that adorned the walls. There were even more pictures of Dudley Dursley in all of his piggy glory. "Follow me," Petunia sniffed disdainfully and marched up the stairs.

Hermione leaned towards Harry. "Said the spider to the fly," she muttered.

Harry chuckled a little before he grabbed her hand and fell in step behind his aunt, Sirius and Remus dragging their trunks through the door. "How many books did you put in here, Hermione?" Remus asked, panting. Hermione just smiled innocently back at him. "That's what I thought."

Turning back to Petunia, Hermione shared a grin with Harry and followed his aunt down a the hallway. She led them to a small room with two twin size beds. "Vernon's sister Marge will be here later tonight, so you two will have to share."

Sirius gave her a dark look, but Petunia shockingly stood her ground. "Wasn't this Dudley's second bedroom?" Harry asked, looking around. "Where did all of his broken toys go?"

Petunia didn't answer. "I have things to do," she said stiffly, walking away. "I have to finish the roast and the rest of the meal for when Marge gets here. I will be in the kitchen."

"I can already tell that this is going to be such a *pleasurable* stay," Hermione muttered under her breath. Harry, who had heard her mumbling, smiled at her. "Do you want the left bed, or the right?" Harry glanced around and shrugged. Hermione suppressed a sigh—it was so like Harry to let her choose where she wanted to sleep. "I'll sleep on the left then," she decided and moved towards her chosen bed while Harry moved to his.

Sirius was livid. "I told them—"

"Padfoot," Remus soothed. "They have company coming, and you gave them two days notice. We'll just have to make sure to organize this a bit better next year."

The other man shifted a little and looked at Harry and Hermione. "Okay you two, we have to be going soon, but we wanted to say something."

"First, we love you both very much," Remus said, taking Hermione's trunk to the foot of her bed.

"Secondly, and this is important, no magic," Sirius said firmly. "Not that I don't think they deserve it, but you two are just kids," he missed the glance Harry and Hermione shared. "And I don't want them to accuse you of things you didn't do and punishing you for it or anything like that, okay? Maybe one day you'll be able to give them just what they really deserve, but for now I think you should keep your noses clean and stay out of trouble, okay?"

"And try to stay out of their way— out of sight, out of mind and all that," Remus added. "Hopefully they won't go looking for you to terrorize you and provoke you." He turned to Hermione. "As for you, we're going to *secretly*, and the key word there is *secretly*, put some charms on this room so that your magic won't be able to do much damage while you're here, alright?"

The pair nodded while Remus stood and began to wave his wand, murmuring under his breath, Sirius joining him. Harry and Hermione stood silently as the two men worked, not wishing to break their concentration. Sirius looked back at them once Remus was finished. "Remember now, no magic, and as much as it pains me to say it, no mischief, especially if it can be traced back to you. But more importantly, we love you both very much. Take care of each other."

Remus pulled Hermione into a tight embrace while Sirius did the same to Harry. "One month," Remus promised. "That's all, one month and we'll be back here to bring you home again."

“Romulus will be here about twice a week with letters, and he’ll wait for a reply.” Sirius released Harry. “We can’t send him here everyday like we wanted because he’ll have other letters to deliver, and we don’t want the muggles around here getting suspicious.”

The older men sighed heavily in unison. “Why don’t the two of you start unpacking, though I don’t know where you’re going to put everything, since they only gave you one dresser,” Remus said wryly as he stood next to his friend. “We have to go speak with your aunt and uncle, Harry, so we have to go. We’ll see you soon. Goodbye Harry, goodbye Owlet.”

“One month— promise. We’ll see you then. Bye Hermione, bye Little Prongs,” Sirius said softly. With that, Sirius and Remus left, shutting the door quietly behind them.

Harry and Hermione stood silently for several long moments before they turned to each other. “How long do you think we’ll last before we use some magic on Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon?” Harry asked.

“Not long,” she replied casually. “Not long at all, considering the warm welcome we received. Come on, let’s get settled in.”

Both turned to their trunks and set to work unpacking. The very first thing they removed were their treasures— Harry took his stuffed stag out and set it delicately on his bed while Hermione grabbed her copy of *The Phantom of the Opera* and set it gently on the small stand beside her bed. Next, Harry grabbed a wizarding photo of himself when he was a baby and his parents and set it on the small dresser, on the right side, while Hermione grabbed a muggle photo of herself, Harmony, and her parents and set it on the left side of the dresser. In the centre, Hermione set a newer portrait— in the back row stood Remus, Tonks, who was holding Harmony, then Sirius. In front of them stood Hermione and Harry, and between them sat Horace, his Order of Merlin gleaming in the light.

“How are we going to divide up the drawers?” Harry asked from beside her.

“Uh, I guess I’ll have one, you’ll have one, and we’ll have the share the other,” she replied, frowning at the dresser. The drawers didn’t seem like they would hold very much.”

Harry nodded. “You can have the top then, and I’ll take the bottom. We can share the middle.”

“Right, we’ll put socks and pyjamas in the middle drawer, and our underclothing and other clothes in our personal drawers,” Hermione agreed.

They set to work emptying their trunks, filling the middle drawer first. Once that was done, Harry began to unpack the few other items he had brought while Hermione put the rest of her clothes away. Setting on the shelf near his bed, Harry had placed a few of his wizarding toys, specifically the flying dragons—Hermione suspected he was going to show them off to Dudley sometime soon. Smiling, she turned away and set to work putting Disco on her bed and the books she had brought up on the shelf on the far wall while Harry put his clothes away. For safety’s sake, both of them had decided to leave most of what they had brought in their enchanted trunks where it was, so that Dudley or any of the other Dursleys couldn’t break anything.

No sooner had they finished putting their clothes away did they hear a sort of pounding. A few moments later the door to their room burst open, revealing a red - faced Dudley Dursley. The angry boy scowled at them. “I bet you two think you’re just great, don’t you? Coming to my house, *my house*, and bothering us normal peoples! And worse, you take my other room! I hate you, I hate you both! You’re dumb stupid heads, and I want you out!” Dudley stomped angrily before leaving without another word.

“Is he mental?” Hermione asked after a moment of silence.

“I don’t know,” Harry shrugged. “Maybe I should ask Madame Alfreda.” He paused. “I wish Misstessah would have come along, so that we could pull a few pranks on Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon.”

“Indeed,” Hermione murmured, partially agreeing after her cold welcome. “So what do you want to do? We still have several hours before your uncle’s sister arrives.”

Harry gave her a sheepish look. "I'm actually kind of tired. I didn't sleep very well last night, because I knew I was coming here today."

Hermione nodded her understanding— she hadn't slept very well either, and wondered if it was perhaps because Harry couldn't sleep. "Why don't we take a nap?" She suggested. "I don't think we should try taking on all of the Dursleys without getting some rest, or we'll be asking for trouble."

Stretching, Harry nodded and climbed into his bed, ready to sleep. Hermione nodded to herself and slipped into her own bed and lay back. It wasn't long before Harry and Hermione, both emotionally exhausted, fell asleep.

Hermione soon found herself standing in the master suite of Potter Manor, home of the Dark Harry and her older dream self. It was still dark here, but she could see the sleeping figures of the Dark Harry and his wife lying in their bed as the sun slowly climbed into the sky. She frowned. Hermione had never had a dream like this one. Normally when she dreamed it was mid - morning, or sometimes around noon.

The Dark Harry began to shift on the bed before sitting up and looking out the window. As he slid out of bed the other Hermione rolled over into his place and buried her nose in his pillow briefly before pushing herself up. "Morning," she mumbled, rubbing the sleep from her eyes.

Harry smiled warmly. "Good morning, Love of my Life," he slipped back into bed and kissed her gently before sliding down the bed and kissing her abdomen. "Good morning, Baby Potter."

The dream Hermione smiled at him. "So, what's on the agenda today, *Minister*," she purred.

Harry sighed forlornly. "I have a meeting with Neville first, then I have to do a routine check up of the auror division, then I need to pay a visit to the Dursleys."

“The Dursleys? Why do you need to see them?” Hermione asked with a frown as she curled up beside her husband.

“Oh, no big deal really, I just need to go straighten a few things out. I’m not even sure why I need to see them today,” he kissed her forehead and got back out of their bed. “And what will you be doing today?”

She smiled and slid out of bed while her younger counterpart looked on in interest. “Well, if it were any other day, I’d be in my lab doing research. As I’m pregnant, I’ll go to the library and do research. I might practice more with my wandless magic— I’m not as good as you are yet. Then I think I’ll do some work on setting up a room for our little one. Have you thought of any names yet?”

The young Hermione looked down at the floor as the couple began to dress. “For a boy I was thinking Bartholomew, or maybe—”

“I am most certainly *not* naming any child of mine Bartholomew!” The dream Hermione snapped indignantly.

Harry gave her a cheeky grin. “I was joking,” he said. “I would be happy with any name really. But I was thinking, if it’s a girl, I would like to name her Harmony,” he wrapped his arms around her. “For your sister. I know you miss her.”

She gave him a watery smile. “What did I ever do to deserve you Harry?”

He smiled thinly. “The real question is what did I do to deserve someone as kind and loving and caring as you?”

“Oh my Harry,” She turned in his arms and looked into his onyx eyes. “I have never met anyone more kind and loving and caring as you.” She kissed him lightly on the cheek. “I would be more than happy to show you just how kind, loving and caring you are, but then you’d be late for your meeting with Neville,” she said with a wink.

Harry laughed. “Ah, the trouble with being the Minister!” He drew away and finished dressing. “I’ll try to meet you for lunch if I can get away, alright?”

The dream Hermione smiled. "That would be wonderful, we could pick out colours for the little one's room."

He smiled before bidding her goodbye and walking out of the room. Hermione followed him, curious as to why he was going to speak with Neville. The dream shifted, and she then found herself standing beside the Dark Harry, who was sitting in a throne like chair. "What did you find out, Neville?"

Neville looked up with a confidence Hermione had never seen in him before. "So far as I can tell, it's nothing more than an undocumented side - effect. My best guess is that each case is unique and has different side - effects. But as you know, research isn't my area of expertise."

The Dark Harry nodded. "Indeed," he looked up. "I'll look into it myself. And the other matter?"

"You were right, of course. Ginny Weasley has teamed up with Draco Malfoy in an attempt to overtake you." He shifted a little. "I guess Ginny was jealous that you chose Hermione instead of her."

Harry smirked. "Likely. I'll deal with them. Put a few agents in the field. I want Ginny and Draco brought to me alive. I'll have to make an example of them." He stood up and stepped towards a nearby window. "They'll regret ever going against me. I gave them one chance, and they'll get no more from me."

Neville nodded. "What are you going to do with Malfoy's wife and son?"

"Kill them probably, as soon as I find a good, worthy ritual. I'm not so careless as to waste a few good sacrifices. I've already secured them. Pansy and Donovan Malfoy mean nothing to him now that he's with Ginny. Doubtless she's already with child." He pondered a moment. "I might keep Donovan. I haven't decided yet. I may keep him as a playmate for the baby."

The other man nodded understandingly. "That'll be nice for the sprout. It'll give them someone to play with while you're gone. Must be hectic,

being the youngest Minister in the history of Britain. Before I go, how are Hermione and the baby, by the way?"

Harry grinned. "Great, they're great. Hermione is only just entering her third week, but she's already made all sorts of plans. I think she's trying to get a head start because she's worried that her morning sickness will throw her off schedule when it begins."

"Ah, the joys of wizarding medicine— you never have to wait to find out if you're going to have a baby." Neville smiled. "Is it a boy or a girl?"

"We don't know," Harry said with a shrug. "We'll find out when the baby's born. We want it to be a surprise."

Neville grinned. "That will mess up a lot of plans. Be prepared to get a lot of yellow baby clothes from your followers."

He and Harry began to laugh. Hermione was reminded how nice Harry's laugh was, even though he was technically evil. When he laughed, it was almost like he was in Hogwarts again, before Professor Dumbledore, Sirius and Cedric were killed. "That I shall." He leaned back and looked at his companion thoughtfully. "Why are you still here, Neville? Why do you still follow me?"

Neville shrugged easily. "You let me have the Lestrangle brothers to avenge my parents, Harry. I can't really repay you for letting me kill then myself." Neville looked up, smiling coldly. Hermione shuddered. How could sweet, innocent Neville kill two people, and look back on his actions as though they were fond memories?

"It was the least I could do, Neville," the Dark Harry said with a matching cold smile on his face.

The dream shifted again, this time to another dungeon. "Oh my, Uncle Vernon, you've made a mess all over my beautiful floor, and Aunt Petunia can't even clean it up." Hermione turned around and immediately wished she hadn't. Vernon Dursley lay twitching on the floor in a mess of vomit and blood. He was panting heavily, his body covered in sweat as he shuddered. The beefy man's back was

covered with looked like long, crisscrossing welts that had long ago begun to bleed.

In the far corner of the room, Petunia Dursley rocked back and forth, her eyes distant. "Must make tea for the guests," she babbled. "And scrub the tiles in the kitchen. No dirt allowed, no, no! Not allowed at all! Can't have anything like that, not in my kitchen, oh no. Guests would think ill of my kitchen." Back and forth she rocked, back and forth. "Tea, make tea and be polite. And clean my kitchen. Bad dirt, bad." She whimpered pitifully. "My poor kitchen! So dirty! And the tea is cold now. Oh, I must make more. Hot tea for guests, and a clean kitchen."

"So, Dud, what am I going to do with you, hmm? I have all sorts of *ideas*," the Dark Harry grinned and vanished the blood - speckled belt he had been holding. He calmly drew his wand, twirling it between his fingers. "But which one should I choose? I have so much to make up for." He pretended to ponder something. "Ah, I know." He smiled maliciously and pointed his wand at his cousin, his eyes alight with mischief. "I know just what to do to you, my cousin. "

"Up!" There was a pounding at the door. "Up now! Marge will be here in ten minutes!" Hermione sat up and looked around before remembering where she was. She slid out of bed and walked over to where Harry was stretching on his own bed.

"Ready to face Medusa's ugly twin?" Hermione asked.

"Not really," he replied as he slipped out of his bed. "But we don't really have a choice, now do we?"

Hermione shook her head. "Let's go, then." She started to walk away, but turned back when she realized Harry wasn't following her. Understanding his reluctance, she walked back and grabbed his hand in reassurance. Taking comfort in each other, they walked, hand in hand, out of their room, ready for anything. Or so they hoped.

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A/N: (Sighs) I really think that the administration here at hates me. I've been trying to upload this chapter since Sunday afternoon! It just kept telling me there was an error. I was very grumpy.

I have to admit, I missed the Dark Harry. And I made Neville evil. It was fun. Yes, there was a delay. Again. I'm sorry, I really am, but it's time for midterms at college, and I've been studying most of the time. I can't wait for Christmas break—then it will be just me and my keyboard. Alas, I have a month until that can happen.

I feel that it is time for me to formally announce what I have told a few people in some of my review replies. I've made a few references to the trilogy in previous notes, but now I'm going to outright say it. I've put it off long enough.

Time, Interrupted is the first part in a trilogy. *Life, Interrupted* will be the second part of the trilogy. It can also be considered a companion piece to part one. Part two will cover what is going on in the other timeline, so if you like the Dark Harry, you'll like that story, because it's all about him, his descent into Darkness, so on and so forth. *Love, Interrupted* is going to be the third part of the trilogy, and can be considered the sequel to both parts . I've dubbed the whole thing *Trilogy, Interrupted*. It will look like this:

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Well, that's all for now. Thanks to everyone who read, and special thanks to those who reviewed. If you would, please review.

Cheers,

Madm05

Chapter Twenty One: Dirty

Six days later, Harry and Hermione sat side by side at the dinner table, trying valiantly to ignore the Dursleys. “I don’t know why she came,” he had said one night, after revealing that she had been there the year before for Dudley’s birthday. “She usually doesn’t want to leave her dogs. It’s odd that she decided to come two years in a row.”

They had later learned that Marge had decided to come visit because she had missed Dudley’s birthday and wanted to give him several gifts, and also because she had heard that Harry was gone. She was quite disappointed to find him there upon her arrival.

At the moment though, Harry and Hermione were quite excited— the next day would be their seventh day at the Dursley residence. Neither of them could wait until the following morning— Marge would be leaving at long last. So far, Harry and Hermione had only managed to not snap at the woman by calming each other down. A soothing touch was all either needed to calm the other. Not even reciting potion recipes was calming anymore.

Privately, Hermione was surprised that neither she nor Harry had used magic in retaliation. The way the Dursleys treated them was more than enough cause for the two to take action, but neither did. They refused to go to Sirius and Remus and admit that they needed protection, but at the same time, they refused to even the score with the Dursleys.

Their stay had been horrible. Aside from Marge’s continued presence, there were many other problems. For one, being back in the Dursley household had caused Harry to have many haunting nightmares about being locked in the cupboard. To quell his fears, they rearranged their room so that their beds were so close they were touching, making one large bed.

The Dursleys had had a great deal of trouble accepting their sleeping arrangement. Marge Dursley had ranted for nearly ten minutes on how disgustingly inappropriate it was, and how they should be separated immediately lest they act in a wanton manner. Hermione had scoffed at that— the only thing inappropriate they were doing in that bed was plotting how to pull a few pranks without getting caught.

Alas, their pranks never came to fruition, as they didn't want to give the Dursleys cause to treat them even worse.

On top of that, Dudley kept trying to get into their shared room and break Harry's toys and rip out the pages in Hermione's books. He stopped when one of Harry's toy knights tried to stab him. When Dudley wasn't terrorizing their room, he was terrorizing the other children of Privet Drive. Harry and Hermione quickly became their defenders, and had gotten into many scuffles with Dudley and his friends. That was why Harry proudly sported a black eye, Hermione had several bruises around her wrist from Dudley's beefy hands, and Dudley had several scrapes and bruises all along his arms and legs.

Hermione knew she and Harry should have told Sirius and Remus about what was going on, but neither could bring themselves to do it— it was too much like quitting. Neither wanted to be called a tattletail or a cry-baby, so both took their licks and gave as good as they got. To Dudley, at least. Secretly, Hermione couldn't believe her own behaviour, but there was something about the Dursleys that made her want to hit something.

"Oh my," Marge slurred slightly. "Dudders is growing up to be such a fine young man. Jus' look at him." She turned and sneered at Harry. "Where as this one is just as sickly looking as ever. You know Petunia, with dogs, if a pup looked as bad as this little brat at birth, it would have been drowned. Only way to weed out the bad genes in dogs, killing the bad ones." Hermione gritted her teeth and grabbed Harry's hand under the table, though she wasn't sure whether she was trying to calm him or herself. "What's the girl doing here again Vernon?" Marge asked.

Harry's uncle hesitated. "Homeless," he replied. "And a troublemaker, but we've agreed to take her in for a month as an act of charity."

Harry looked like he was about to say something, but Hermione silenced him with a look and began to recite the recipe for Polyjuice potion in her mind. Stealing a glance at Harry, she was sure he was reciting Latin verbs, judging from the look on his face.

"You were always far too kind, brother. Where do they go to school?" Marge asked.

"The boy attends St. Brutus's Secure Centre for Incurably Criminal Boys," Vernon replied. "It took a bit of work and talking to get them to take him this young, but once they met him, they understood. It's a good place for lost causes."

Marge accepted a glass of brandy from her brother. "And the girl? She certainly shouldn't be in a school for boys. How did you get conned into caring for that little snot?"

Hermione couldn't help herself. "I attend St. Beatrice's Secure Centre for Incurably Naughty Girls," she snapped. "And I get a top of the line education! I can speak fluent Latin, can you?" She flinched at his comments. *They don't need to know that I could speak Latin before... before I began living with Papa Remus and Sirius. I just hope Harry doesn't notice.*

Marge scowled. "Why you insolent, dirty little—" she raised her hand.

"Don't you dare!" Harry snarled, standing on his chair and leaning over the table. "Don't you dare even *think* about hitting Hermione!" The lights overhead began to flicker on and off.

"To your room!" Vernon bellowed, seeing the signs of accidental magic. "Both of you! Immediately!"

"With pleasure!" Hermione snapped in return, grasping Harry's hand more tightly and walking away from the room. "The nerve of those people," she hissed. "Lying right in front of us, telling those awful stories. Are they complete idiots? They should know we'll tell Papa Remus and Uncle Sirius how they're treating us."

"Why? We haven't said anything yet. I'm just glad we left before she could start talking about our parents, because she would have, if she'd had the chance. She doesn't like me very much, and she likes saying bad stuff about my mum and dad. The bad thing is that I used to believe everything she said, because I didn't know anything about them, but now I do, and I know she was lying." Harry sat on the edge of the bed and sighed. "What are we going to do now?"

"I don't know," she murmured. "I'm sorry Harry. If I hadn't lost control of my temper, we wouldn't be here, and we could be eating. I wish I'd been able to eat more than three bites of food."

Harry grinned at her. "I don't know, I think I like it better up here, and..." He pulled a napkin out from under his shirt. "Surprise! I didn't think I'd last very long with Aunt Marge— she's always worse when she's drinking— so I thought it would be a good idea to sneak some food for us just in case they sent us to our room. Here," he opened the napkin to reveal two dinner rolls. "It's not very much," he said by way of apology.

"It's better than nothing," she replied, and took the proffered roll.

"What do you think everyone's doing?" Harry asked suddenly after swallowing a bite.

Hermione smiled. "I bet Harmony is causing all sorts of mischief. She's probably painted the walls purple by now, or at the very least she's tried to *eat* the paint. Horace is probably trying to find a place to hide from Harmony. The house - elves are probably taking care of the house and making sure Papa Remus and Uncle Sirius are fed properly, since neither one can cook." Harry chuckled. "And I think Papa Remus and Uncle Sirius miss us very much."

Harry smiled at her words and climbed up to the top of his bed and slipped under his blankets. "So, you go to St. Beatrice's, huh? I've never heard of her," he said, his eyes alight with mischief. "And can you really speak Latin?"

Unable to help herself, she flushed. "I couldn't help it. She just made me so mad, that I just sort of snapped, I guess. And yes, I can speak Latin," she hesitated. "I learned it before," she answered uneasily. She pushed the thought away as Harry nodded in understanding. She quickly changed the topic. "Forgive me for getting us sent up here before we could really eat our dinner?"

"It's okay, I promise. I used to get sent to my cupboard without meals all the time, so this is a lot better." Harry paused for a moment. "Tell me a story Hermione?" He asked. "Maybe it will keep us from thinking

how hungry we are. I used to tell myself stories in my cupboard when I was hungry. Maybe it will work for you.”

Frowning at his words, Hermione climbed up beside him and took her place on her side of the bed. She glanced at the clock. It wasn't even seven. A story would have to do, especially since she and Harry hadn't eaten all day, except for the few bites at dinner and the two stolen dinner roles, since they had been hiding out in their room all day to avoid the Dursleys.

“Once upon a time, there was a little boy named Harry. Now Harry didn't know it, but he was very special, very special indeed.” She slid under the blankets and propped herself up on her arm to look at her friend. “You see, Harry was meant to do great things, but he had many troubles he had to face before he could become a hero. He had to face his wicked aunt and her family for many years, and they treated him very badly.

“Then, one day, a little girl and Harry's godfather came and rescued him, taking him far away. He had to return to his aunt's house once a year, but he would always return to his real home, because his godfather loved him very much.” She leaned forward, looking deep into Harry's eyes. “Harry was going to do great things one day, great things, and his family would stand behind him.”

“And his best friend,” Harry added. “Harry's best friend never let him be alone— she even came with him to his wicked aunt's house.” He grinned. “Tell me another story, one about, I don't know, something about a dragon. That would be great.”

Hermione smiled. “Once upon a time, there was a baby dragon named Norbert. When he was very young, he was sent far away to Romania, but he didn't like Romania very much, because the other dragons were mean to him. Then one day, he decided to come home...”

An hour later, Harry was sound asleep, his hunger forgotten. Hermione was snuggling down in the blankets on her side of the bed to try and sleep, when the door creaked open. Quickly feigning sleep, she watched through her slightly opened eyes as Petunia Dursley peeked into the room. Believing them to be sleeping, she crept into

the room and left a covered plate on the nightstand. She sniffed disdainfully at their sleeping arrangements, then turned and left. Curious, Hermione sat up, wriggled out of bed, and looked under the foil covering. Hermione raised an eyebrow. Sandwiches. Two of them.

Hermione briefly considered letting Harry continue to sleep, but she didn't want to remind Harry of a time when he would go to sleep and wake up hungry. "Harry," she said, shaking his shoulder gently. "Harry, wake up." He mumbled something unintelligible. "Harry, I crashed your broom and broke it."

"What?" He gasped, sitting up.

"Boys," she muttered. "I said your aunt brought something for us to eat," she gestured to the plate. "Come on, let's see what she brought."

Harry sat up and peeled the foil away. "Looks like turkey sandwiches." He handed one to Hermione and took the other. "So, why do you think she gave them to us?" He asked then took a bit.

The young witch frowned. "I'm not sure. She might have given them to us because she was afraid of Papa Remus or Uncle Sirius coming here, or she might have felt bad for us. I mean, she's your mum's sister, so she can't be all that bad, can she?"

"I don't know, Hermione," Harry replied softly. "She was never nice to me before. It might just be because she's afraid, like you said."

Hermione sighed. "I guess we'll never know, will we? I'm certainly not going to ask." She bit into her sandwich.

"I'm not either," Harry said, taking another bite.

Hermione sighed. "I prefer to give people the benefit of the doubt." They ate in a companionable silence, quickly devouring their food. Once finished, they climbed back into their places in their beds and drifted off to sleep.

The following morning, Harry and Hermione woke before the sun had risen. Hermione shivered as she remembered her dream—the Dark Harry had dealt with a spy within his ranks. It hadn't been pleasant.

"Morning, Hermione," Harry yawned, sitting up. "Do you want to go on downstairs, or do you think we should keep hiding up here?"

"We might as well go down. Maybe we can eat breakfast before everyone else gets down there. I don't think it would be a good idea to go so long without food like we did yesterday, especially since we don't know if we'll be sent to our room," Hermione replied.

Harry nodded. "That's a good idea. Let's get dressed and go down to eat, okay?"

Agreeing, Hermione stood to dress herself while Harry stared at the toys on the shelf about their beds. Fully dressed, she stood beside him and began to read the titles of her books while Harry began to dress. It was a system they had worked out their first morning in the Dursley residence and had worked out quite well for them.

"Ready?" Harry asked as he finished tying his shoes.

"Not really, but it's not like we really have a choice, is it? Let's go," she replied, grabbing the empty plate Petunia had brought up the night before. "Hopefully we can get some cereal and go outside before anyone knows we were up." She frowned as Harry began to pat his hair, trying to tame it. "What are you doing?"

"I'm trying to get my hair to stay down but it won't," he cringed. "Aunt Petunia hates my hair. She was looking at me funny yesterday, so I think she'll probably want to give me a haircut soon."

"We'll cross that bridge if and when we come to it. For now let's hope she doesn't feel like giving you a trim herself or paying for a trip to the barber," Hermione replied. Harry nodded in response.

Ever polite, Harry opened and held open the door for Hermione. Smiling, Hermione stepped through the doorway and set off to the kitchen. Just as she had hoped, the kitchen was empty. Sharing a

look, the pair quickly set to work making themselves some cereal once Hermione had put the empty plate in the sink.

Their luck came to an end when they heard Vernon coming down the stairs. "It really is a shame you couldn't stay longer Marge. It's so good to see you again."

"Oh I'll certainly try to come by more often. I dare say that you'll need help if you're taking in those two whelps. Too big for their britches, if you ask me. Need to take them down a peg or two. A few days without meals ought to do it, I would think." Harry and Hermione cringed when they heard Marge speak. "No class, those two! I'll bet they can't even play an instrument! Does Dudders play anything? He should, he'll attract all sorts of attention from girls when he's older."

"Ah, Petunia and I were thinking about signing him up for lessons of some sort, but we couldn't decide what he should play," Vernon replied. Harry and Hermione smothered a smile just in time for Vernon and Marge to enter the kitchen.

"You!" Marge scowled. "What are the two of you doing down here? The both of you ought to be locked up for your despicable behaviour last night."

"Believe me," Harry said with a frown. "We'd rather be in our room that look at you, but we were hungry." Hermione set a warning hand on his arm to soothe his rising temper. It was a mistake she would regret.

"What is that?" Marge demanded. Confused, Hermione glanced at Harry then back at Marge. "Where did you steal that ring, you little thief?" Hermione looked down—her betrothal ring! She quickly pulled her hand back, belatedly realizing that it made her seem guilty of something. "Why you filthy little piece of garbage! Stealing the rings of others and prancing about, flouncing such a sacred symbol as an engagement ring!"

Hermione gasped at the accusation, but distantly realized that someone as *muggle* as Marge Dursley would never understand the concept of wizarding betrothals. What could she possibly say?

"I gave it to her for Christmas," Harry said simply, clearly not grasping gravity of the situation.

"What is going on here?" Petunia said, walking into the kitchen.

"Is Harry in trouble?" Dudley asked hopefully.

"That disgusting little boy just admitted to being a thief!" Marge snapped. "He admitted to stealing that ring and giving it to the girl, and now she's flaunting it about like it's something to be proud of."

"I didn't steal it! It belonged to my Dad's family," Harry yelled in his defence. Hermione swallowed and reached out again to calm Harry. She couldn't let him say too much.

"Your father was a low life," Marge snarled. "And he was probably a drunkard, to boot. You're trouble, you are. You're nothing but a dirty little worm, not fit to shine shoes for a living."

Hermione gritted her teeth, ready to hex the older woman for her cruel words against her sweet Harry. She needed to calm herself down. *If brewed properly, the Polyjuice Potion allows the drinker to temporarily take on the appearance of another person.*

Marge rounded on Hermione. "And you," she sneered. "You'll grow up to be nothing but a filthy, good for nothing little—"

Marge slammed into the far wall. A fierce wind, reminiscent of her darkest moments, whirled around her dearest friend. His messy hair moved whipped violently about his head as he glared at his uncle's sister. "Don't talk about my family! Don't talk about Hermione" Harry said between gritted teeth. "You— you have no right! You're nothing but a— a heartless cow!"

Hermione panicked— the Ministry would be able to tell magic was being used in the presence of muggles. If they investigated the situation, they would be able to tell that Harry was the one doing all of the magic. That would attract a great deal of unwanted attention and publicity. Thinking fast, Hermione focused her magic on shattering the anything glass in the kitchen, everything but the windows. Teacups, plates, bowls all shattered with a single thought.

Now the Ministry won't know who did what. They can only trace our signatures, so they'll know we both did magic, but they won't know how much of it was Harry's doing. I can't let him draw the eye of Voldemort's followers! The damage done, she turned back to Harry. Now that he was relatively safe from attracting too much attention from Voldemort's servants within the Ministry, she needed to keep him safe from the Ministry itself.

"Harry," Hermione said desperately, pulling him into a tight embrace. "Harry, you need to calm down, you can't keep this up, you'll get into trouble." She wasn't getting through to him. "Harry, you're being a bad boy," she whispered softly in his ear, hating herself for manipulating him as she was. "Santa won't let you help him next Christmas if you're a bad boy."

The wind immediately began to die down and Harry looked at her. "I— I'm sorry. I didn't mean to lose my temper." His voice was soft and full of remorse.

"I know Harry," she soothed. "I'm sure Santa knows as well, and I'm sure he understands. But you still shouldn't have done that," she whispered to him. Frankly, she understood exactly why he did it—she would be a hypocrite if she denied him the right to defend his family. She would have done the same in his place. As it was, Marge had said nothing to disparage her parents. Distantly she was aware that Vernon was making incoherent noises and Petunia was sobbing, holding her son as if to protect him.

A moment later a series of sharp cracks sounded as several aurors appeared. "Not her again," she heard one auror groan. "We get more reports of magic on that one than any other witch or wizard." The Dursleys gaped at the group that had appeared out of nowhere.

Hermione frowned. Reports? How were they getting reports on her doing magic? Was Grimmauld Place being monitored? *I'll have to speak with Papa Remus about that*, she thought.

"I did it," Harry said stepping forward. "It was me, I did magic."

"I did magic as well," Hermione stepped up to stand beside Harry and took his hand. "It was an accident— we didn't mean to, but we were

so angry that we couldn't help it." She bowed her head as if in shame, Harry quickly following her example. *I can't let Harry get caught doing so much magic or he'll become an even bigger target.*

"Great," another auror muttered. "It's catching. Now every kid will be having tantrums and destroying houses."

Hermione inwardly cringed and pushed thoughts of her destroyed house out of her mind. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Harry give her a strange look. "It's not like we did it on purpose!" She said indignantly. *Well, it's not like Harry did it on purpose, at least. I did, but he didn't.* Hermione looked over at the Dursleys. Petunia and Vernon were trying to calm a rather hysterical Marge, not paying the least bit of attention to what was being said.

"Be that as it may," the auror began. "The two of you have caused a great deal of trouble. We'll have to get in contact with your guardians—"

"Fathers," Harry and Hermione said in unison. Harry looked at Hermione, silently telling her to continue. "We were officially adopted. Remus Lupin is my father, and Sirius Black is Harry's father," she explained.

The auror in charge opened his mouth to speak when two more cracks sounded—Sirius and Remus had arrived. Marge, upon seeing two more men appear out of thin air, fainted dead away. Petunia looked at her sister-in-law and looked as though she were ready to join her, especially in light of the thunderous expressions on their faces.

"Do you think *we're* in trouble, or do you think *they're* in trouble?" Harry asked.

"I hope it's them, but without luck, it might be us," Hermione murmured. Harry nodded his agreement.

"What is going on here?" Sirius demanded, stepping forward.

"It would seem," an auror who had previously remained silent spoke. "That your children cannot control themselves and have begun terrorizing these muggles."

"That's right," Vernon said, a slight glint in his eyes. "We were just sitting down to breakfast when these two started doing... *things*." He shuddered dramatically. "They've been doing odd things all week, and they're thieves to boot!"

"Thieves?" The auror in charge asked. "Explain."

"The boy gave the girl a ring! He must have stolen it from some good, hardworking family," Vernon said firmly, though Hermione could tell he had a difficult paying a compliment of any sort to a wizard. "And they've been threatening my son their entire stay, and been impossibly rude to my sister."

The aurors frowned and began to murmur amongst themselves. Hermione snorted loudly to catch their attention. "He's talking about my betrothal ring— and no, it wasn't stolen." She turned to Vernon. "And it is entirely legitimate— Harry and I are engaged." *Take that! Harry's six and has a fiancé. Your son will never have so much as a girlfriend, let alone a wife!*

"She's telling the truth," Sirius said, glaring at Vernon. "They've been betrothed for some time now, close to a year, but she didn't get the betrothal ring until Christmas. Everything is legal, and the ring is the traditional betrothal ring for the Potter line, so you can verify it if you want," Sirius told the aurors.

"No need," the head auror said. "Betrothals are commonplace." Vernon's eyes bulged in his head. "Now, tell us about the other things. By the sound of it, these muggles were entirely unprovoked, and you kids were must causing a great deal of mischief. What have you to say for yourselves?"

"We don't bother Dudley," Harry said calmly. "We try to stay away from him because he's mean. We try to stay in our room."

“Room?” The head auror asked. “Don’t you mean *rooms*, kid? Young or not, one of you is a boy and the other is a girl. That’s not appropriate.”

Harry shook his head. “No, Hermione and I share a room, but we don’t mind, because we don’t need a lot of space. Hermione usually reads and I usually play with my toys. We like to stay out of the way because Aunt Petunia, Uncle Vernon and Aunt Marge don’t like us and lie about us.”

Vernon began to sputter. Sirius was red with anger and Hermione was almost positive that she heard Remus growl. “Oh yes,” she chimed. “Mr. Dursley told his sister that Harry goes to some school for criminals and said that I was a homeless troublemaker. We’ve avoided as much contact as possible,” she concluded. She had briefly considered telling them about being sent to bed without supper, but didn’t feel like explaining why they were sent away, or how Petunia had snuck them sandwiches in case it was done without Vernon knowing.

“That true?” The auror growled.

“Yes,” Sirius hissed darkly, looking at the Dursleys. “Do tell.”

Vernon looked as though he were trapped between the metaphorical rock and a hard place. “I... that is... well... Those children have been using me and my family!” He said at last. “They’ve eaten our food, taken up space and done nothing in return.”

“Actually,” Hermione interrupted, “Harry and I have gone out of the way to not cause any trouble. We haven’t done any chores, because none were asked of us. Further, we have actively stayed away from everyone and remained quiet despite provocation.”

“How does a kid know what the word *provocation* means?” One auror muttered.

“However,” she continued, ignoring him. “Our efforts have been in vain because Harry’s aunt and uncle have lied about not only Harry and I,” her expression darkened. “But our parents as well. It was such

remarks about our parents that caused Harry and I to lose control of our magic, causing it to act up, sir.”

“Really now?” The head auror said. His face was blank— he was clearly not going to show any emotion to indicate his beliefs.

“Just ask Miss Dursley what school Harry attends,” Hermione replied. “She will say that he attends a school for criminal boys, because that is what Mr. Dursley told her.”

The auror nodded as everyone looked on. Vernon looked as though the vein throbbing in his forehead was going to pop. With a quick wave of his wand, Marge Dursley was restored to consciousness. “There, up you go, Madame,” he grunted, trying to pull her to her feet. “Well now,” he said once she was standing. “I would like to ask you one simple question.”

“I assure you, this isn’t necessary,” Vernon interrupted.

“That’s for him to decide,” Sirius said, his voice deceptively soft.

Vernon quieted immediately. Behind him, Petunia squeaked and latched on to her husband’s arm. Dudley peeked around his father’s rotund belly. “Is Harry still in trouble?” He asked.

Then the most remarkable thing happened. Marge, her face red, her large body shaking opened her mouth— and said the most unusual thing. “Moo!” She began to flap her arms about as her eyes widened with fear. “MOO!” She grabbed her brother’s shirt and began to shake him. “Moo! Moooo!”

Chaos ensued. Petunia screamed and began to sway while Dudley whimpered and tried to hide behind her, but was too wide. Vernon began to sputter once more, his whole body shaking with anger as his face turned a violent shade of purple. Hermione bit her lip until it bled to keep from laughing, while Harry, Sirius and Remus didn’t even bother to hide theirs. After Learning that it was Harry’s doing, Sirius even going so far as to pat Harry and the back exclaiming “That’s my boy!”

One auror commented that Harry was a pretty powerful young man if he could do that accidentally. Hermione didn't know whether to be proud, or fear for the future. Several other aurors were snickering and grinning as they changed her vocal cords back to that of a human. Once she could speak, the head auror had to force feed her a powerful calming draught. Hermione wondered, distantly, if what the head auror had done was legal.

"Madame," the auror began, speaking loudly over the others to the dazed woman. "I have something I would like to ask you. Do you know what school young Mister Potter attends?"

Marge snorted in a very unladylike manner. "Why, my dear brother Vernon was just telling me last night that he sends the boy to St. Brutus's Secure Centre for Incurably Criminal Boys." Many of the people drew in sharp breaths. Marge continued on, oblivious. "A good school for hopeless cases like the boy, according to my brother. Personally, I think he should have just left the boy there for the entire year. No reason to go and get the boy only to send him back later, especially since the filthy little freak does nothing but cause trouble." *I guess that talking about Harry was a good way to make her forget everything she just saw,* Hermione thought.

"I see," the auror said through gritted teeth. "Mathias," he said, turning to a man in the auror ranks. "This is your area of expertise." He looked back at the Dursleys. "As for you, well, I'll let their fathers deal with you."

"F-fathers?" Petunia stuttered.

"Oh yes," Remus grinned wolfishly. "Sirius adopted Harry and I adopted Hermione some time ago."

"Yes," the head auror nodded. "Weren't you listening to the kids a bit ago? They said then that they were adopted." Petunia paled further, indicating that she had not been paying attention.

"All done here," the auror named Mathias said, walking away. "Her memory has been changed and she'll come 'round in about five minutes."

"Good," the head auror said. "Now, I can't do much here, seeing as this is a muggle household, but I will be reporting you to the wizarding authorities and seeing to it that something is done about the way you treat Mister Potter and Miss Granger - Lupin."

"In the meantime," Sirius scowled at them. "You have us to deal with."

"Right. Well, we'll be off now. I've a report to file," the head auror said before apparating away, followed by his squad of men.

Sirius and Remus took a seat at the table. "We'll just sit right here for now. Harry, Hermione, why don't you two grab a few apples and head on up to your room, okay? Moony and I are going to have a little... chat... with the Dursleys."

"Yes Papa Sirius," Harry said, grabbing an apple out of the basket in the middle of the table.

"Yes Uncle Sirius," Hermione said, also taking an apple and walking with Harry up the stairs.

"So," Harry began. "Do you think we'll get to leave, or do you think we'll have to stay here for the entire month?" He asked.

Hermione frowned. "I'm not really sure. Both options are possible. You're supposed to stay here for at least a month, according to Professor Dumbledore, but you aunt and uncle have clearly demonstrated that they are not very good caretakers." She shrugged and bit into her apple.

"I don't even know why I have to stay here," he said in frustration. Hermione remained silent, not knowing what to say. The two remained quiet after that, choosing to sit alongside each other in a comfortable silence eating their apples. It was some time later that Sirius and Remus came back into the room to find Harry playing with his toys and Hermione reading on the bed.

"Hey you two," Remus said quietly with a smile. His smile quickly faded. "I know that both of you want to leave, but you can't. Professor Dumbledore just came by and spoke with us and... ah... you two will have to stay."

Sirius muttered something darkly under his breath before looking up at them. "The good news is that we convinced him to let you go a full week early, so you just have to tough it out for another two weeks. Then Moony and I are going to take you both out for the biggest ice cream sundae in all of England." Harry and Hermione laughed quietly. "Do you think I'm kidding? I'm serious."

Hermione snickered. "That was a horrible pun."

"You can't win them all," Sirius replied with a smile.

"I don't get it," Harry said, brow furrowed.

"He said he was serious, but his name is also Sirius, just spelled different." Remus explained so that Harry could understand.

"But really," Sirius said, kneeling down to look Harry in the eyes. "Two weeks, okay?"

"Two weeks," Harry said with a nod.

Hermione didn't think two weeks could pass quickly enough. Then a thought struck her. "Papa Remus," she began. "One of the aurors said that they had reports of me doing magic," she said innocently. "What does that mean?"

Remus frowned. "I don't know." He looked at Sirius, who also wore a frown. "Don't you worry about it," Remus said with a soft smile. "We'll look into it." Hermione nodded. He would have far more luck that she would— at least he was an adult who had access to such information. "Two weeks," he said, kissing her on the forehead.

"Bye," Harry and Hermione said softly as their fathers slipped out. They looked at each other and sighed. *Two weeks with the Dursleys is worse than taking my OWLs*, Hermione thought. She lay back on her bed, willing time to pass quickly.

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A/N: Yes, a ridiculously long wait, but my midterms are over, finally. Just to prove that I wasn't wasting my time, I am pleased to announce

that I got a 97 on my anthropology test, a 98 on one of my psychology tests, 100 on the second psychology test, and another 97 on my sociology test. Then there was family things going on, then a holiday, then was screwy. I honestly think that I've had more problems with the site since they updated their software in late October than I had before then.

Regretfully, my updating schedule won't stabilize for some time. I have 4 that I have to write, all of which are due within the next week. It's not very pleasant, especially since there's only one paper that sounds even remotely interesting (Sociology—I have to write a three page paper connecting things I've learned in sociology to a book I've read. Guess which book I plan to use.) After that I have finals. I'm sorry, but I have a busy schedule for college this quarter, and my grades are more important than my writing, especially since my scholarship is riding on them.

Well, thank you everyone who read, and special thanks to those who reviewed. And thank you everyone who was ever so patient to wait this long.

Cheers,

Madm05

Chapter Twenty Two: Fear

The two weeks at the Dursley residence passed surprisingly quickly for the two children. It had been something of a trial for them, as they were still terribly tempted to avenge their slandered parents. Hermione, who remembered everything that both her Harry and the Dark Harry had told her about the Dursleys, and Vernon in particular, had wanted nothing more than to shove the walrus-like man in the cupboard he had dared to lock her Harry in for all those years. Besides, he wasn't related by blood, so he wasn't helping Harry in any way, really. And, she knew, with her wandless magic, she could do it. Her sweet Harry, however, always seemed to know when the urge came over her, and he would set his hand on her shoulder and calm her down.

The head auror had, as promised, reported to the Dursleys to the proper wizarding authorities. It was only because of Professor Dumbledore's intervention that Harry and Hermione remained there. The Ministry, determined to be seen doing something, sent an undercover auror to Privet Drive daily to check on the two. Every three days, said auror would leave his spying and find a way to speak to them to be sure they were being treated well.

The Dursleys, for their part, determinedly ignored them. Harry, who had finally become accustomed to people paying attention to him as well as loving him, had a difficult time adjusting to being nonexistent once again. Luckily Hermione kept him company and gave him plenty of attention. Hermione, on the other hand, usually enjoyed being in the spotlight so long as it was to show her intelligence. During her stay with the Dursleys, however, she discovered she had never been happier to be a nonentity.

They were given food when they were hungry, and they were given a choice of milk or water to drink, along with a place to sleep, but they were ignored for the most part. No one spoke to them, and more often than not, Harry and Hermione would make themselves a sandwich rather than eat meals with the Dursleys. It was as though they were nothing more than ghosts in the house.

With Marge gone, Harry and Hermione spent most of their time in the park, watching the other kids play. No one had wanted to play with them as no one wanted to incur the wrath of Dudley Dursley, but Harry and Hermione didn't really mind. They spent most of their time talking about going home, playing games and daydreaming about riding their horses.

But then there was Petunia. She was strange in so many ways, and no matter how hard Hermione tried, she just couldn't understand the older woman. Petunia would watch them on occasion, but would look away when she knew she'd been seen. It was disturbing, in a way, that she would watch them so closely.

When at last their adopted fathers arrived, neither felt they could have been happier. True to his word, Sirius took them to Diagon Alley, where they met Tonks and Harmony, and ate large ice cream sundaes while ignoring the stares of others frequenting Diagon Alley. Typically, Hermione tried to give people the benefit of the doubt, but the Dursleys were such horrible people that it drove her to distraction. She had never been so happy to leave the muggle world in all of her life, not even when she left for her first year and Hogwarts and felt she was finally escaping Miranda Johnson, one of her classmates from the first timeline who had made it her personal mission to make Hermione's life as miserable as possible.

Now, however, it was summer, and without the Dursleys looming over them, it was a bright summer ahead of them indeed. School would not be starting for a long while yet, and Sirius and Remus were keeping Troublesome Twosome, as she and Harry were sometimes called, busy. Busy meant learning better control over their powers. Without anyone there to see them, the pair continued on with their training, making up for the lost time at Privet Drive.

They had only been home for a few days when their new schedule had been given to them. They would train to better control their magic on the odd days, and clean on the even days. Neither had really minded. Harry was good at cleaning, courtesy of his time with the Dursleys, and Hermione had cleaned the house in the first timeline in the summer before fifth year. The only thing that really bothered her was that she no longer had the chance to do research on the various

Bonds within the wizarding world, not that there were very many books on it in the library.

And so they trained and cleaned. Remus, Sirius and Tonks, when she was there, were always sure to keep the pair away from anything that would harm them. For the most part they were dusting or polishing things. The adults would sort through everything that the house - elves had stored away to determine what would be kept around and what would be thrown away, and Harry and Hermione would clean whatever was kept.

"Hermione? Are you hungry?" Harry asked, looking up from the candlestick he was trying to clean.

"A little," Hermione replied. "But I'm more interested in getting this work done so that I can do some reading. We could have lunch when we finish this if you want," she offered.

"Yes, that would be good." Harry sighed in frustration and scowled at the candlestick he was holding. He looked up at Hermione. "The spot won't leave," he grumbled. "How is this good for us again? Especially since my birthday is coming up soon."

"So we don't become lazy, even if your birthday is in a week," Hermione replied as she set the wizarding gadget she had been cleaning aside, having finished her task. "Besides, working hard builds character."

"I'd rather be playing my piano," Harry replied with a pout, but went back to work on the candlestick. "That builds character, and it's fun."

"I'd rather be playing my violin as well," she answered knowingly. "Or riding. I'm sure Archimedes and Gloria are feeling terribly neglected. We were at your aunt and uncle's house for so long, and then when we finally come back home, we're put to work cleaning and working on our powers."

"Yeah, I miss Gloria. She's so fast," he looked wistfully out the window. "And flying. I haven't been able to go flying in so long."

"Well, Uncle Sirius didn't give us that much work to do. Once we finish these few things here, we can go play. You can fly if you want. I'll watch you."

Harry gave her a knowing look. "You mean you'll sit under the tree and read while I fly." He grinned. "That sounds great. Ha!" He held up the spot - free candlestick with pride before setting it aside and picking up the next item, a small metal box, to clean. "I'd rather be flying right now."

"Or riding," Hermione added absently.

"Or drawing," Harry grinned, knowing full well that Hermione hated drawing.

Hermione wrinkled her nose in response. "Or reading."

Harry, mimicking his friend, wrinkled his nose. "Or sleeping."

Hermione laughed. "How can sleeping be fun?" She reached for another candle stick. "I'd rather be doing something constructive, myself."

Harry sighed loudly in mock - exasperation. "Well of course you'd like to be doing something constructive! You're Hermione Granger-Lupin!" He said with a cheeky grin. Hermione threw her rag at him. Harry easily caught it and tossed it back. Hermione, in a shining display of her athletic abilities, missed. Harry began to chuckle.

"Oh, ha ha. Just because you're going to be a Seeker," she muttered as she bent to pick up the rag and went back to polishing.

"What else, Hermione? Can't you tell me *anything* about what's going to happen in the future? Please?" Harry pleaded, a look of excitement in his emerald eyes. "You told me I'm going to be a Seeker, but can you tell me anything else?"

Hermione pondered a moment when a thought struck her. "I can tell you who your best friend is going to be."

Harry gave her a bland look. "That's not very hard, Hermione, I already know who my best friend is."

"Oh?" She asked, a little surprised. Harry and Ron barely tolerated each other. She was hoping that she would be able to use this opportunity to get Harry to consider being nicer to Ron and building the friendship she remembered from the first timeline. *Perhaps, she thought, fate is working for me and has already brought them together as friends.*

He gave her strange look. "You, of course," Harry replied as though it was terribly obvious.

Hermione smiled at him in return. He really was so very sweet. *I guess fate isn't going to lend me a hand.* "Silly me, I meant *our* best friend. Another friend."

"Really?" He perked up, interested as he set the box down and picked up a glass figurine to clean. "Who is it? Neville? He's really nice. He could be our friend."

Here I go. "Ron Weasley," she said, holding her breath and waiting for his reaction.

"What?" Harry shook his head as though he was sure he had misheard her and looked back at her. "What was that?"

"Ron Weasley," she said again, more firmly this time.

"That's what I thought you said." He said and went back to the figurine, frowning. Hermione shifted uncomfortably in the silence that followed. She desperately needed Harry and Ron to become friends. It simply wouldn't feel right if they weren't a trio. "But Hermione," Harry said after several long moments. "He's so mean! I heard him calling you a nightmare! And then he asked you for help on his work! I don't want to be his friend if he treats you like that."

Hermione sighed. She had been afraid of this. "He's not that bad, Harry." Harry gave her a look that clearly said he didn't believe her. She quickly decided it was time to try another tactic. "What do you know about Ron, Harry?"

"He's mean to you," Harry said bluntly. "And he's always trying to copy your work in class, but it never works, because you're always doing harder work than we are. Then, when he can't copy you, grumbles about how you're a know - it - all, and that if Papa Sirius and Uncle Remus hadn't betrothed us, you would never be able to get married. And now he's ahead of a lot of the other kids because you helped him anyways, and he never even thanked you for it!" Harry shook his head. "He's mean. I don't like him."

Hermione winced at Harry's words. She had helped Ron with his work as often as she could, but she hadn't been able to spend much time with him outside of classes. As best she could figure, he was afraid that if he spent time with a girl, he would turn into one. He always seemed anxious to get away from her, along with the other girls. It was the only reason she could think of for why he wouldn't go near any of the girls, his sister included. But such a fear, if it did exist, did not justify his treatment of her.

"Did you know he has older brothers?" Hermione asked, getting back on track.

"Yes," Harry nodded. "Percy, Fred and George, and two others, I think, but they go to Hogwarts. I think Percy is going to Hogwarts this year. Oh, and he has a little sister too. What's her name? Jenny?"

"Ginny," Hermione replied. "And how do his brothers treat him?" She pressed.

Harry frowned and squirmed in his seat before looking back down at the glass figurine. "Percy ignores him," Harry said softly. "And tells him to grow up. Fred and George pick on him a lot."

Now I'm getting somewhere. "Do you think Ron likes being ignored and being picked on by his brothers?" She asked.

"No," Harry said softly, his eyes shining.

"Ron doesn't have any friends, does he? Why do you think that is?"
Come on, Harry.

Harry sighed. "Because the others are afraid Fred or George or both of them will pull a prank on them."

She hated herself for bringing up such horrible memories for him, but she really wanted— needed, if she were honest with herself— Ron to complete the triangle, so that he, Harry and herself could be a trio again. "So it's kind of like how Dudley made everyone afraid of him so that no one would be your friend, right?"

The young wizard looked ashamed of himself. "I didn't think of it like that. I bet he would be a really good friend, wouldn't he?"

Hermione smiled. "Yes, I rather think he would be a wonderful friend to have." She looked at Harry. "What do you say we become his friend when school starts up again? It must be lonely, not having a friend." *And I've got you*, she thought, feeling a tad guilty for playing on his memories of his less than pleasant childhood.

"You're right," Harry said, going to back to his polishing. Hermione nodded in satisfaction and picked up the last glass figurine to be cleaned. They continued to work in silence, both lost in their thoughts. In the back of her mind, Hermione couldn't help but think to herself, *take that, Trelawny!* She may not have gone into a trance or looked into a crystal ball, but she had made what Harry believed to be a true prediction, not realizing that she had manipulated the situation. *At least I can make it seem like I actually know what I'm talking about. Inner eye, indeed.*

Suddenly the door banged open. "Hewmnee! Hawwy! Wanna pay!" Harmony giggled merrily as she toddled into the room.

"Harmony! How on earth did you get up here?" Hermione asked, setting the small glass fairy down and picking up her sister. "You really should be in your room, you naughty girl. How did you get out this time?"

Harmony gave her sweet smile and giggled again. "Hi-seek, Hewmnee, hi-seek!" She laughed, excitedly throwing her hands in the air.

Hermione laughed at little. "No, Harmony, we can't play hide - and - seek right now. Harry and I have to finish our chores and then we're going outside to play." Harmony began to pout. Hermione sighed as Harry chuckled. "Oh alright, but just one round, okay? Harry and I really want to go outside to play."

Harmony shrieked with delight and toddled off. Sharing a look with Harry, the two older children covered their eyes. "One! Two! Three! Four! Fi—" Their chant was cut off when Harmony began to scream and cry. As one, the pair leapt to their feet and took off in the direction of the scream.

They were shocked, then, to find Harmony standing in front of an open wardrobe, screaming and crying as she stared at a pile of her favourite toys, but they all looked to be broken. Confused, Harry stepped forward, strategically putting himself between Harmony and her broken toys. "It's okay, Harmony," he soothed as Hermione looked on, smiling a little at his gentle manner. "Everything is going to be okay—"

"No it won't," Hermione's chilled voice said. "Nothing is going to be alright, not with you around Harry. You're a bad boy, and your dumb on top of it. I don't know why I ever thought it would be a good idea to be your friend. Dudley was right. Who would want to be friends with a freak like you?"

Harry swallowed thickly and turned around. The pile of Harmony's toys was gone, and in its place was Hermione, standing calmly, a look of disgust on her face as she stared at him. He bowed his head. This was it, the moment he had been waiting for, the moment Hermione realized what he was like. He looked up at Hermione, as she was speaking again.

"I mean, it's quite obvious, isn't it? You're just not very smart. I've spent all this time helping you and it was a waste, a great big waste. You aren't worth my time Harry. I don't know why I bothered in the first place, really. I guess I felt bad for you because you were just so dumb and such a freak." Harry felt like he couldn't breathe. "Face it, Harry, you're just a horrible person altogether."

Hermione watched, shocked as a mirror image of herself say those horrible things to Harry. *Wait! The broken toys, me saying those things, the open wardrobe door... A boggart!* Throwing caution to the wind, Hermione rushed forward and unceremoniously shoved Harry and Harmony out of the boggart's line of sight. She was sure that she could handle McGonagall telling that she was an abysmal student far better than Harry could handle what the impostor Hermione was saying to him.

Sure Harry and Harmony were safe and sound and groaning as they pushed themselves up, Hermione turned, prepared to face failure. It was a shock, then, when the figure looking back at her was not Professor Minerva McGonagall. Far from it, in fact.

His black hair seemed even darker against his pale skin, his obsidian eyes glittered down at her, and his lightening bolt scar clearly visible on his forehead. Seeing him in a dream was frightening enough, but standing before him in all of his Dark glory was something else altogether. He was as terrifying as he was awe - inspiring, as horrible as he was magnificent.

"My, my," he murmured as he knelt down so that he was eyelevel with her. "Such pretty little lies, such subtle deceit." The Dark Harry smirked at her. "Why, you're just like *me*, aren't you?"

Hermione's heart skipped a beat as her blood ran cold. The world stopped spinning as she stared at him. She opened her mouth to deny his words, but she could only draw in quick, shallow breaths. Unable to speak, she shook her head, saying with actions what she couldn't say with words.

"Oh yes you are," he seemed amused. The Dark man leaned down and whispered in her ear so that neither Harry nor Harmony could hear. "I know how much you lie to those you call family— you could match me. And, my little Hermione, you've become as creative as I have. A Seer? Not a title that you chose for yourself, true, but I can't help but notice how you used it to your advantage. Oh yes, you are a great deal like me, my dear.

"Your oh - so - subtle manipulations, the way you've twisted even the worst of situations to your advantage? Truly a Slytherin tactic. But

then, you've always had a little bit of Slytherin in you, haven't you? Stealing from Snape's potions stores, not to mention setting his cloak on fire, lying to teachers, blackmailing Rita Skeeter, leading Umbridge into the Forbidden Forest... Truly a stroke of genius." He grabbed her fiercely by the chin, looking into her eyes. "Just like me," he murmured with a smirk.

Hermione choked back a sob, trying to deny his words with all of her being. *No, please no, not this, anything but this.* Thoughts plagued her. Was she becoming like the Dark Harry? Would she become the Dark Hermione? Breath came in short gasps. So many lies, so much deceit... perhaps she was becoming like the man she tried so desperately to keep her Harry from turning into. She tried to back away, tried to escape, but she was trapped, frozen in place by his hypnotic eyes.

"Let her go!" Just as suddenly as he appeared, the Dark Harry was knocked away from her by none other than the young Harry. "You leave her alone!" Harry snarled, as he unknowingly tackled the image of his counterpart. Harmony, terribly confused, began to cry again.

The boggart quickly shifted again to once again reflect Harry's greatest fear. "I thought I made it clear that I didn't want you anywhere near me," the boggart - Hermione hissed. Harry looked mortified at what he believed he had done to his friend and threw himself back in a confused daze. "Honestly! I thought you were at least smart enough to understand that much, but I guess I was wrong. Let me spell it out. Stay... Away... From... Me!" Harry was shaking from his place on the floor.

"It's not me!" Hermione yelled, finally finding her voice. "It's not really me, Harry, I'm here!" Harry turned slowly, almost as though he were afraid of what he would see. Tension left his body when he saw her standing where she had been before, relatively unharmed. Of course, seeing two Hermione's left him terribly confused.

The doors on the far side of the room banged open as Sirius and Remus rushed in, wands drawn, nearly tripping over themselves in the process. "What's going—" Remus was cut off when the boggart, now free of Harry, turned and faced the older man.

“Werewolf!” The boggart - Hermione shouted fearfully, pointing at Remus and taking a step back. Remus froze, mid - step, the blood draining from his already pale face. He began to shake terribly and drew back, visibly hurt by the boggart’s words. Then the boggart turned and saw Sirius and shifted once more.

“You!” The boggart - Harry snapped accusingly. “You’re the reason my parents are dead! Some godfather you are! I wish you were still rotting in Azkaban,” he spat. “Just stay away from me.” Sirius became as pale as Remus has, and began to shake just as badly.

Understanding dawned on the werewolf, who raised his wand. “Riddikulus!” He shouted.

Suddenly the boggart shifted into an overgrown poodle with bright pink fur, a jacket, top hat, and cane. In a striking display of flexibility, the boggart began to tap - dance. “*Hello my baby, hello my honey, hello my ragtime gal,*” the dog began to sing, still dancing.

Despite the seriousness of what each of them had seen, even Hermione, still shaking from her encounter with the boggart, they all laughed. Harmony, in all of her naiveté, clapped and giggled over the display. Harry, who had made his way over to Hermione at some point and had tentatively taken her hand, chuckled at the display. Hermione, understanding the power of laughter, laughed a little louder than she normally would have.

Sirius, having recovered enough from his fright, raised his wand and with a sharp flick of his wrist, drove the boggart back into the wardrobe it had escaped from. The group was silent for several long moments as they tried to calm themselves from the incident. Harmony, who had enjoyed seeing the dancing, singing dog, was the only one who pouted over the loss of her entertainment— the others were relieved.

“What was that... that thing?” Harry asked weakly, glancing shyly at Hermione. She gripped his hand tighter in a comforting gesture.

“That, Harry, was a boggart,” Sirius explained, striding towards them. Remus was a step ahead of him and had already scooped Harmony up into his arms.

"Nasty creatures, boggarts," Remus said, sitting on the ground beside Hermione, Harmony wriggling in his arms. "They are your worst fears made real." He pulled Hermione close to him as Sirius did the same to Harry on the other side.

"But they're not really real," Sirius said. "I mean, your fears, it's not really there, it's just what you're afraid of. It's like, if I were really afraid of, oh I don't know, let's say spiders, than the boggart would turn into a spider. If I were afraid of mummies, it would turn into a mummy." He winced. "I'm not very good at this."

"So," Harry began slowly. "You're afraid that I'll hate you because my mum and dad are dead?" Sirius froze and didn't reply. "I don't," Harry said softly, looking up at his adopted father. "I don't hate you at all."

"That's nice to know, Little Prongs," Sirius said, just as softly, his eyes glistening a little. "Bloody dust," he muttered, rubbing his eyes and sniffing.

"Language, Sirius," Remus chided.

"And it certainly doesn't matter to me that you're a werewolf, Papa Remus," she smiled weakly. "I've met people who are far more monstrous than you have ever been," she said, firmly pushing thoughts of steel grey eyes and platinum blonde hair out of her mind.

Remus chuckled lightly and kissed the top of her head. "I appreciate that."

Harmony began to squirm and looked up at her adopted father. "Papa Moo! I potty, Papa Moo."

The older man laughed, obviously glad for a way to release some of the tension that had been building. "Well, we had better get that taken care of, shouldn't we, my clever girl? Come on then." He turned to Harry, Hermione, and Sirius. "Will you be alright here?"

"We'll be fine, Papa Moo," Sirius quipped. "You go on. I'll take care of these two, you take care of the little one." Remus gave Sirius a dark look before he squared his shoulders, adjusted his grip on Harmony, and set off, grumbling about annoying friends.

After Remus left, shutting the door behind him, Sirius peered down at his young charges. "So," he said quietly. "What did you see?"

Silence. Neither Harry nor Hermione wanted to speak their fears, neither wanted to acknowledge them. "Harmony saw her broken toys," Harry muttered.

"While that is a valiant effort to avoid talking about it, that's not the answer I was looking for. What did *you* see?" Sirius asked, hugging the young boy around his shoulders. "I know it involved Hermione, Harry, but I can't help you face your fear if you don't tell me what it is." Harry muttered something they couldn't hear. "What was that?" Sirius asked.

Harry sighed. "I said I saw Hermione telling me I was dumb and that she didn't want to be my friend anymore. She was saying that Dudley was right all along." He shuddered slightly and fell quiet.

"Oh Harry," she said softly. "You know I would never say that to you." She squeezed his hand again. "We'll always be friends, no matter what, I promise."

"There, you see?" Sirius soothed. "That mean old boggart wasn't telling you the truth." He looked at her. "What did you see, Hermione?"

Words stuck in her throat. *What can I say? I saw your godson as a grown man who had turned into a Dark Lord, and oh, by the way, I'm afraid I'm going to turn out as evil as he is? I think not!* "I..." She shrugged, not knowing what to say.

"Come on, Hermione. Who was that man?" Harry asked innocently, his curiosity plain. "I know he bothered you, Hermione, I can feel it. Why does he bother you so much?"

"What man?" Sirius asked, now looking at Harry rather than at Hermione. The young witch stared at her hands, unwilling to look up, wishing it was over.

"He was a tall man, with a scar just like mine," Harry said, looking at his godfather. Hermione cringed at his words and looked away. "But

he had these really scary black eyes, and he didn't have glasses. And his hair was black like mine, but it was just like Draco Malfoy's hair, the way it was stuck to his head." Hermione winced at the mention of the younger Malfoy and began to stare resolutely at her hands once more.

"I see," Sirius said, his voice quiet. "Listen Harry," he began, his tone carrying a forced lightness. "Why don't you go downstairs for some lunch, okay? I think you're done working up here for a while— your birthday is coming up soon after all! So you go on down with your Uncle Moony, while I speak with Hermione for a minute, okay?"

Harry glanced at Hermione, unsure of whether or not he should leave her. Hermione nodded, almost imperceptibly, saying that he should do as asked. He nodded reluctantly before releasing her hand, standing, and leaving just as Remus had.

"Was it him?" Sirius asked, his voice hoarse. "Was it Harry?"

She hesitated a moment before nodding sharply once. She felt faint. The Dark Harry's words still rang clearly in her ears, haunting her. *My, my. Such pretty little lies, such subtle deceit. Why, you're just like me, aren't you?* Her stomach turned at the thought of another lie.

"I take it, then, that he becomes a Dark wizard," his voice was choked. "Black eyes and no glasses— sounds like a Dark ritual to me, and no decent wizard would do something like that." They were quiet for several long moment, neither knowing what to say to the other. Finally Sirius broke the strained silence. "Can it be changed?" His voice was soft, almost afraid of the answer. "Can he be saved."

"Yes," Hermione said just as softly, daring to speak for the first time. "Yes, he can be saved," she whispered, more to reassure herself than her best friend's godfather. They fell silent again, but the silence was not as daunting as before. Sirius suddenly reached over and pulled her against his side, hugging her and kissing her lightly on top of her head much as Remus had.

"Thank you," he whispered against her hair. "Thank you." He released her suddenly before standing up and reaching down for her. "Well,

we'd better get downstairs before they think the boggart escaped again for another round."

Hermione hesitated slightly. "Uncle Sirius," she began. "Don't tell Pap Remus. I don't want anyone else to know." She knew it was silly of her, but she was sure that if Remus knew, he would act differently around Harry and herself. She wanted everything to go back to being as normal as they could be, and forget about the day's events.

Sirius looked at her for a long moment before slowly nodding. "I think he should know, but I won't tell him, Hermione. This isn't the sort of thing people talk about during dinner, that's for sure. I don't like it," he paused and set a hand on her shoulder. "But I understand. I won't tell Remus, you have my word. Now, let's go downstairs," he started walking to the door. "I don't know about you, but I'm hungry."

Hermione laughed lightly, strongly reminded of Ron. "Alright," she smiled, following him to the door. "I'm a bit hungry," she said, though any appetite she might have had earlier had fled when the boggart had shifted into the Dark Harry. Sirius opened the door for her and walked with her down the dark hallways, down a flight of stairs, then down several more hallways.

"Is everything alright?" Remus asked as they entered the kitchen. He was sitting at the table, reading a copy of the *Daily Prophet* as Harry bit into a sandwich. Harmony was in her booster seat, whatever she was eating smeared around her mouth. "Harry said there was trouble."

"No trouble, Moony. Your little Owlet and I were just having a bit of a chat, that's all. Nothing to worry your furry little head over," Sirius quipped, taking a seat next to his friend.

"If you're sure," Remus said, looking between them.

"Relax, Moony, everything's fine, really. We just had a chat, did a little bonding, that sort of thing." Sirius smiled easily at his friend and looked at Harry. "What do we have to eat? Anything good?"

“I made a sandwich,” Harry said. “Dobby tried to make me something, but I didn’t want him to, I wanted to do it myself and let him keep doing his own work.”

“Which was very responsible of him,” Remus chimed in, taking a sip of tea before handing the newspaper he was reading to his friend. “I’m finished. You can go ahead and look for the Quidditch scores.”

“Excellent!” Sirius grinned, snatching the paper away. Remus rolled his eyes and took another sip of tea. Smiling, Harry took another bite of his sandwich. Hermione took her seat, content to watch her family and enjoy one of the rare quiet moments.

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A/N: I know, I’m ridiculously late. The good news, is that finals are over. I’m pleased to announce passed all of my exams with flying colours. The bad news is that, now that I’m out of class, my boss has me working more hours on top of my last minute Christmas shopping. I do promise I’ll update as soon as I can.

Thanks to everyone who read, and special thanks to those who reviewed. Oh, and in case I can’t update again any time soon, Happy Holidays!

Cheers,

Madm05

Chapter Twenty Three: Snap

Harry and Hermione stood, side - by - side, waiting for everyone to arrive. The sun was shining brightly outside, rays streaking down through the widows in the foyer. The weather was wonderful that day— there a few clouds in the sky and there was a fine summer breeze outside.

A mere seven days had passed since the boggart had made it's appearance. It had been a quiet week, with no one daring to bring up the boggart and the fears it had literally brought to life. They had all wordlessly agreed that they would simply pretend that it had not happened, silently agreeing that the topic was taboo. Not even Harmony brought up that scary day when she saw a pile of broken toys.

The only problems, that Hermione could see, were a few differences in the way Sirius acted. He seemed quieter now, much less boisterous, and more pensive. Hermione had caught him staring at Harry several times, and would promptly sneeze or drop something to make him look away. He was quieter when he spoke, too. It was as if he thought talking softly would keep Harry from turning into the next Dark Lord.

Now I see why I'm not allowed to tell anyone the truth, she had thought. Now that Sirius knows part of the truth, he's acting differently. If I'm not careful, someone will figure out what's going on, then more people will start acting differently, and treating Harry differently, then it's entirely possible he'll still turn into a Dark Lord!

Harry, for his part, had looked as though he wanted to ask her about her Boggart. She could see the questions burning in his emerald eyes every time she looked at him. *Why did that man have a scar like mine? Why are you afraid of him?* As time passed and the memories faded it was becoming easier to distract him. Luckily, he was easy to distract.

Aside from keeping Sirius from giving too much away and keeping Harry from asking too many questions, the week had been very enjoyable for the children of Grimmauld Place. Because Harry was turning seven on his birthday, Sirius had decided he would have

seven chore - free days. Privately, Hermione was sure it had something to do with the Boggart as well, but she didn't argue, since if Harry didn't have chores, it meant she didn't either.

Instead, they had spent their time outside, chasing each other around, and practicing their wandless magic. As far as Hermione could tell, they could fly roughly as fast as they could run. Granted, neither of them were very fast, but the fact that they could fly at all was amazing, and still left Sirius and Remus in awe.

Harry had also begun trying to teach Hermione a little bit of parseltongue. It turned out that it was possible to learn to speak the snake language— she just couldn't understand what a snake was saying. As she wasn't a parselmouth herself, she couldn't hear what a snake was saying at any given time as Harry could, but she was slowly but surely learning to mimic the language itself. So far she had learned the formal greeting for a snake, and how to say 'please don't hurt me'. It wasn't much, but Hermione felt it was better than nothing.

And so on July thirty first, Harry, Hermione, Sirius, Remus, Tonks and little Harmony were standing by the door, meeting and greeting. The entire Weasley clan, along with the last remaining Malfoy, had already arrived, and the group was waiting on the Tonks' to appear.

"Does he really have to be here?" Harry asked darkly, glaring at Malfoy, who glared back.

"Yes, Harry, so be nice," Sirius replied. "You said you wanted to invite the Weasleys to your birthday, and Draco lives with them. It would have been rude to ask the other Weasleys to come and not invite him." He smiled down at Harry. "Besides, it's not every day that you turn seven! You should be excited Harry."

"I wouldn't mind being rude and not invite Draco," Harry grumped. "He's not very much fun anyways."

Hermione smiled fondly at him then nudged her friend and nodded at Ron. "Do you think we should go ahead and ask him to be our friend now?" She asked. Harry's frown deepened, and Hermione could tell that, despite his words a week earlier, he was still hesitant to become fiends with Ron.

It was at that moment, however, that the Weasley twins pulled a rather nasty trick on Ron. Somehow the pair had gotten hold of an ice cream scoop, and dropped a scoop full of ice cream down the young boy's trousers, which resulted in Ron doing a rather exotic dance. He danced from foot to foot, yelping and struggling to remove his trousers and by default the ice cream while his sister and brothers, with the sole exception of Percy, laughed at his expense.

Harry, having fallen victim to more than one of Dudley's cruel pranks, understood exactly what Ron going through at that moment, and rushed to his aid. Striving to save Ron any more embarrassment, he snagged the young redhead by the collar of his shirt and dragged him down the hallway to his bedroom.

No sooner did Harry shut the door to his room did Ron snap at him. "Let me go! Let me go now! You're helping them, aren't you? You're helping Fred and George make me look dumb! I'm not dumb I tell you, I'm not!" Ron huffed.

Harry scowled in reply. *This* was the thanks he got for helping? He gritted his teeth. "I know you're not dumb, and I never said you were. I just wanted to help you," he said in a matter - of - fact manner. "Now, you're going to need another pair of trousers to wear, since yours have ice cream all over them." He pulled out a new pair of slacks that a little big on him and handed them to the red haired boy. "Here, put these on."

Ron looked at them suspiciously, still wriggling from the ice cream. "They have itching powder in them, don't they? I know they do. You're trying to embarrass me."

Harry bit his tongue. "No, they don't, and I'm not trying to embarrass you. Just put them on already, I'm not trying to pull a prank on you, I promise." With that, Harry turned around to give the other boy his privacy. He could hear Ron muttering and pulling off his trousers when the door opened.

"Harry? What's— oh my word!" Hermione, who had just stepped into the room, whirled around and faced the door at the sight of a half - dressed Ronald Weasley. "Should have knocked, should have knocked," she squeaked.

Ron continued to mutter and dress himself. Harry and Hermione waited patiently with their backs turned, listening to the rustle of cloth. After a few moments, the rustling stopped, but Ron never said anything. They continued to stand in silence, waiting for Ron to tell them they could turn around, and dreading the embarrassment of turning around if he wasn't dressed.

"You have a really neat room," Ron said at last, his voice wistful. "I bet it must be real nice to have a room like this."

"It's alright," Harry replied, turning around.

"Makes it difficult to fall asleep though," Hermione added as she faced Ron. "It's so distracting— you just want to stare at the animals all night." She paused. "Winky?" She called out. A moment later, the little elf appeared. "I believe Ron has something he'd like to ask you."

Ron looked dumbfounded for a moment before he caught her meaning. "Oh, um, would you wash my trousers?" Hermione cleared her throat. "Please," he quickly added.

"Yes sir, Mister Weasley," Winky replied as she picked up the ice cream covered trousers and vanished with a pop.

The three stood in silence, unsure of what to say. "Er, how's the weather?" Ron asked finally.

"It was a bit cloudy, last time I looked out the window, but the sun was shining," Harry replied seriously.

Hermione could help herself as she began to laugh. The situation was too ridiculous. "I can't believe you two are talking about the weather," she chuckled and shook her head. The boys looked a bit sheepish, with Ron's ears turning red while Harry's cheeks became flushed with his embarrassment. Hermione laughed again and smiled at them.

"Well you do have a really neat room," Ron muttered as he looked around. He turned back to Harry. "So," he hesitated. "Do you, I mean, would you like to be friends? I mean, you don't have to if you don't

want to. I'll understand, I mean, if you don't want to because I'm not funny like Fred and George or—"

"I'd like that," Harry interrupted, his lips twitching into a small smile. "Come on," he said. "I'll show you my toys," Harry said excitedly.

Hermione looked on for several moments as the two boys talked and looked at the Quidditch figurines. *Well, they're not best friends yet, but that will come with time*, she thought. There was still a sense of formality in their conversation, but as the boys continued to talk, they began to relax more and more. It would be a long while before they became as close as they were in the first timeline, but she was sure they would get there eventually. *It's a step in the right direction. At least I'll be able to get something back on track.*

The party wouldn't officially begin for another hour or so, to give everyone time to settle in and, in the case of the twins, cause trouble. The boys would have plenty of time to get to know one another. They had already struck up a conversation about Quidditch. Rolling her eyes, Hermione backed out of the room and into the hallway.

Relieved to get away from what had already evolved into Quidditch talk, Hermione headed towards her room, intending to give the boys some privacy and enjoy a few minutes of time to herself. She truly loved Harry, it was almost impossible to *not* love the boy, but he could be rather smothering at times. He had gotten better after he had finally realized that she wasn't a dream that would vanish when he woke up.

Hermione blamed the Dursleys for the way Harry acted. The way they treated him, must have affected him, and the effect was only compounded by his still undeveloped mind. She could see it in the way he tried to help with everything, as though he was afraid he would be turned away if he didn't. It was in the way he would scan the room he had just walked into for her, Sirius, Remus and Harmony to make sure they were real and not a dream. It was painful to know that Harry felt like he was in a dream world.

Sighing, Hermione stepped into her room, basking in the glow of silence. She stood still for a moment. *Something is wrong*, she frowned. The animals on her walls were behaving oddly. The stag

was staring at her, prancing anxiously on the opposite wall. The rabbits looked ready to dive for cover at any moment, their ears twitching nervously. The otters were watching her carefully, not daring to move. Deciding that it would be safer if she were not alone, Hermione turned around just as her bedroom door slammed shut.

Draco Malfoy stood in the corner of her room, his body trembling, whether with rage, excitement, or something else altogether, she didn't know. There was a strange, manic glint in his eyes as he stared at her for a long moment. "It's your fault," he said at last, his voice broken and slightly hysterical. "It's all your fault." He pulled a stolen wand out of his pocket. "And now you have to pay for what you've done. I'll make you pay for killing my father you filthy," he gritted his teeth, "disgusting little *Mudblood!*"

Hermione felt as though she had been hit in the stomach. She couldn't breathe and her body began to tremble. This was wrong, this was all wrong. *It's happening again!*

The young girl collapsed in a heap as the walls around her began to melt away, leaving behind a hauntingly familiar setting in its stead. Knick knacks lined the walls, and two suits of armour guarded the door. A small cot was on the far side of the room, properly made as though it had never been slept in. Her necklace was gone once more, and the intense tingling of so much surrounding magic around her left her all but crippled. She was back in Malfoy Manor. *Not again!*

"That's right, my son," a chilling voice said. "Now try the incantation one more time. This time, try thinking about how much you hate her before casting the spell." Lucius Malfoy sneered down at his prisoner, standing tall in his resplendent robes. "After all," his cold grey eyes narrowed. "She is only a filthy, disgusting little Mudblood."

Distantly she could hear pounding and someone calling her name, but they were so far away... she could only stare, lost, into a pair of cold grey eyes. They engulfed her, trapped her even as the magic around her paralysed her. The pounding continued in the distance.

Her breaths came in short gasps and a deep ache settled into her body. Her fingers ached from when they had been broken. *Harry*, her

mind begged. *Where are you?* Draco levelled his wand at her. She began to shake even more, suddenly terribly cold...

"Well, what are you waiting for, boy? Go on then, cast the spell. You've done it once, now do it again, and this time, *mean* to cause pain. She is only a filthy, disgusting little Mudblood."

Draco opened his mouth to speak, but suddenly turned away as Hermione's world began to grow fainter.

Hermione!

Everything was blurring together, making it hard to see properly. There was something green hovering above her, but she couldn't make it out clearly. Everything was fading away, gradually becoming darker and darker until there was nothing...

Hermione awoke to a humming sound. There was a dull ache in her fingers, and her head hurt terribly, but she was fine, other than that. *Then what seems so off?*

"—honestly, Mr. Lupin, I swear I had no idea that would happen. I try to keep a close eye on the boy, but he must have slipped away when the twins were acting up. Oh, the poor dear!" Someone was saying.

"Calm down Molly, and for the last time, call me Remus. It's alright, I understand. You couldn't have left him home by himself, and it would have been horrible to leave him with someone else while the rest of the family came to Harry's birthday. And you didn't know he was going to take Charlie's wand and go after Hermione like that. Come," Remus was saying. "We'll go sit outside in the lobby for a while. Harry and Ron are sitting with her. They'll call for us if something should happen. Besides, since Arthur took Draco back to the Burrow, Sirius and Dora are the only ones watching the rest of your children. They'll probably need some help."

Hermione sighed and forced her eyes open, squinting into the bright light. Taking a moment to adjust to the light, she blinked several times before turning to look around her. She was in St. Mungo's. Again.

What luck, she thought darkly. As if I didn't spend enough time in the hospital wing when I was at Hogwarts! I'm getting to be as bad as Harry with all of these hospital trips.

She turned her head to the left and beheld a sight that warmed her heart. Harry and Ron were sitting at her bedside. Ron looked like he was asleep, with a trail of drool dribbling out of the corner of his mouth. Harry was sitting stiffly in his chair, staring at his hands. It wasn't a cheerful sight, per se, but her boys were sitting beside her, waiting for her to get better.

"Hello there," she said softly. Harry's head immediately snapped up.

"Where's the fire, mum? I need my pony," Ron said, his voice thick with sleep as he forced his eyes open.

"Ron," Harry began slowly. "What does a fire have to do with a pony?"

The red head frowned. "You know, I don't know." He shook his head. "So, how are you? You look horrible. Do you feel horrible?"

Harry looked offended for her, but Hermione smiled. Good old Ron. She could always count on him to be lovably outlandish. "I'm fine, really I am. But what happened? I mean, I've been fine all this time, but then I... I don't know. It was as if..." Hermione trailed off, unwilling to think of it.

"The healer said you have postlumatic dress disrober," Ron said.

Harry nodded. "He said sometimes it has a 'delayed onset' whatever that means." He looked at her with sad eyes. "He said your reaction was 'triggered' by something, and that it happens with Horrors all the time." Hermione smiled a little at Harry's continued mispronunciation of the term 'auror'.

"Yeah," Ron nodded. "So, do you know what the trigger was?"

She is only a filthy, disgusting little Mudblood.

"No," Hermione said, trying to keep her voice level, but not able to help the small quiver. "No I don't know. So," she changed the subject. "Have you two been here the whole time?"

Harry gave her a look that said he didn't believe her, but would let it slide this time. "Yes," he said. "Ron and I found you, and we stayed with you."

"It was right scary," Ron said suddenly, his eyes wide. "One minute we're talking about his Quidditch toys, and the next thing I know, he's running off shouting about you needing help." Ron shook his head in awe. "I've never seen anything like that before." His chest suddenly puffed up. "I tackled Draco," he said importantly.

"Sure did," Harry said as he looked at Ron with gratitude. "I went to help you when I saw you on the floor, and Ron tackled him."

Ron shrugged. "I've been wanting to tackle him for to do something to let me do that ever since he pulled Ginny's hair," he said, leaning back into his chair. Harry and Hermione gave him an odd look. Usually Ron was the one picking on Ginny. "What? She's my sister! Just because I don't like her doesn't mean I'm not going to defend her when someone's mean to her." He paused. "It was a nice tackle, wasn't it?" Ron asked, looking very proud of himself.

"Great tackle. Best tackle I've ever seen," Harry said instantly.

Hermione shook her head as she watched them talk about Ron's glorious tackle. The way they interacted amazed her. Earlier she had been relieved that they were talking to each other at all, and now they were the best of friends. And more, Ron was actually being nice to her. *I guess the only way for me to make friends with Ron is for him to team up with Harry and save me from something. First the troll, then...*

"—I was thinking of biting him," Ron was saying, "But—"

"Shouldn't one of you go get Papa Remus? Or a healer?" Hermione interrupted. She really didn't want to hear about Ron's plan to bite Malfoy. It was disturbing on too many levels to count.

"Yeah," Ron agreed. "Someone should definitely do that." No one moved. "I guess I will." With that, Ron slid out of his chair. "Oh, and Hermione?" Ron said as he paused by the door. "You're okay. For a girl." He concluded, then turned and walked importantly out of the room in search of a Healer or one of the adults.

Harry shook his head. "He's acting like he saved you from a troll or something," he grumbled softly. "I bet he wouldn't even have known you were in trouble if I hadn't told him, let alone help you. At least he's not being mean to you anymore."

"It's not a problem Harry," Hermione said, deciding not to address that particular issue. She reached out and grabbed his hand. "I'm so sorry, Harry. I've ruined another birthday," she said, her shoulders slumped.

"No!" Harry said vehemently. "You didn't, honest. My birthday's not over yet, and you're okay, so it's alright. And you should be allowed out of here soon," he rushed to say. "So we can all go home and have cake!" His voice softened. "It will be a great birthday, because you're going to be fine."

"The world doesn't revolve around me, Harry," she said weakly.

"But you're my best friend in the whole world, Hermione. You're my *first* friend, and you always help me when I need it, and I wanted to help you. I'm just glad you didn't get taken away again."

Hermione nodded and felt a twinge of pain in her fingers again. Had it really been a year since she had been taken away? With everything that had happened to her, it felt like so much more time had passed. "Indeed," she murmured then looked up at her friend. "not that it would have mattered—you would have rescued me."

"Of course!" Harry grinned, his emerald eyes lighting up. The light dimmed. "Are you going to be alright, Hermione? You scared me."

Hermione swallowed. "I..." She didn't want to lie anymore. "I don't know Harry. I think I'll be okay, but I don't know for sure." She offered him a weak smile, which he returned.

The door to her room opened, revealing Matilda Rosen, Remus, and Ron. "I got a Healer and Mr. Lupin." Ron told them needlessly.

"Hello Miss Granger-Lupin. I'm glad to see you awake." The woman smiled warmly. "Now, I just wanted to tell you that I know you probably want to go home, but you're going to have to wait for a bit. I need to explain to you what happened. It seems you had—"

"A flashback," Hermione interrupted. "I essentially relived a traumatic event. It's a symptom of post traumatic stress disorder. Considering the severity of the trauma I suffered, it will likely be a chronic illness as no real cure, so to speak, has been found." Hermione recited. She flushed a little and mentally kicked herself. She hadn't really meant to say so much—it would give her away for sure. The only reason she knew about the disorder in the first place was because she thought Harry may have been suffering from it after Sirius' death in the first timeline. There was no reason why she should know it now. *Foolish!* She berated herself. *You're going to get yourself in trouble!*

"That's right," the Healer said, looking a bit dazed. "My, you certainly do read a great deal, don't you? Such a clever little girl." Hermione had to bite her tongue to keep herself from saying that she was actually going on twenty. "That's exactly what you have. Now, as for treatment." Matilda Rosen began to flip through her paperwork. "I see you are already seeing a Mind - Healer. Hmm."

She turned to Remus. "I suggest you have your daughter meet more frequently with Madame Alfreda. And for her nerves... hmm... I think it would be best for her to have a minor calming draught for her nerves. There's nothing in the potion that will activate the two - part poison in her system, so it will be perfectly safe for her.

"She should take it every morning, and then any time she feels she needs it after that. Hopefully the symptoms will fade over time." The Healer handed him a note. "I trust you can get to an apothecary?" Remus nodded. "Then you and your daughter may leave, if you wish. If she has another episode, you can bring her here, or care for her yourself."

Matilda Rosen nodded to them with a cheery smile and walked out of the room. "Harry, Ron, why don't the two of you go and tell everyone

that everything is fine?" Remus asked the two boys. Ron nodded vigorously, obviously pleased that he was given another important task, but Harry looked reluctant to leave Hermione's side. At her nod, he stood and slowly followed Ron, glancing behind him before he left.

When Hermione and Remus were alone, the werewolf made his way to the bed at a slow pace so as not to frighten her. He sat down on the edge of the bed with pain - staking care and slowly reached out and pulled her into his arms. "I'm sorry, little Owlet," he said softly. "I should have been paying closer attention to what was going on." His voice was hoarse with self-loathing.

"It wasn't your fault, Papa Remus," Hermione replied, enjoying the feeling of warmth that enveloped her. It had been so long since her father had held her, just like this, and soothed her fears. It had been so long since—Hermione cut off her thoughts. She couldn't afford to dwell on the past. There was too much work for her to do.

She still hadn't decided when would be the best time for her to discover the Room of Requirement. She was still torn. Should she destroy the Horcruxes first year, free the world from Voldemort and break the curse on the Defence position, and trap the school with someone as inept as Professor Lockhart for a teacher? Should she wait until later, and risk not knowing for sure if Voldemort was truly destroyed? There were so many things that could go wrong, as she knew only too well...

"I should have known better, Hermione. It was a mistake. There were precautions that I should have taken to keep you safer," he pulled back and looked down at her. "You're too forgiving for your own good, Hermione. You have every right to be terribly upset with me."

"You didn't do anything wrong, Papa Remus." Hermione said firmly. "If anyone should be angry, it would be Harry. This is the second birthday that I've ruined."

The werewolf began to chuckle. "We're quite a family, aren't? Sirius, Molly and I have been beating ourselves up for not knowing what the little Malfoy was going to do, Harry's been beating himself up for not getting to you sooner, and you're beating yourself because you think you've ruined Harry's birthday." He shook his head. "Hermione, Harry

doesn't blame you for anything. I'll bet my wand that he's just glad you're alright. Now," he stood up, lifting her into his arms. "Let's go home and celebrate Harry's birthday, okay?"

Hermione smiled. "Okay, Papa Remus. Let's go home."

Remus grinned. "Home sounds like a good place to be right now. I say we go," he shifted her in his arms and set off for the door, nodding the Healers as he passed them in the hall. Hermione, relaxing slightly, allowed her head to rest on his shoulder as he carried her through the hospital.

"—so everything will be okay. When Hermione and Remus get here we'll all go back to Grimmauld Place and continue on with Harry's birthday. Ah! Remus, there you are," Sirius said. Hermione looked at the group standing with him. Everyone but Mr. Weasley and Draco had come to St. Mungo's with her. "And Hermione," his voice was gentler than before when he spoke to her. "Are you alright, Mini-Moony?"

"I'm fine Uncle Sirius, really. Let's go home," Hermione replied, twisting around to look up at him.

"Yes," Harry agreed quickly, staring off to the left. "Home sounds good." Hermione turned in her adopted father's arms to see what Harry was looking at. She scowled when she saw several healers gawking at Harry and pointed at him. Harry shifted uncomfortably and tried to smooth down his hair.

"I quite agree," Remus and Sirius said at the same time, also seeing the looks Harry was receiving from the staff at St. Mungo's. "Let's get going then," Remus said.

Sirius picked Harry up in his arms and walked down the hall to the exit, followed by Tonks, with Harmony bouncing in her arms, Remus, Hermione, and the Weasleys. "We'll take the Knight Bus again," Sirius said. "It will be quicker that way." Sirius raised his wand arm and hailed the Knight Bus and paid everyone's fare. Molly tried to protest, but Sirius cut her off. "I pretty much dragged the lot of you with me," he said. "The least I can do is pay for your return to my house."

The ride home was exactly as Hermione thought it would be—noisy. The Weasley twins were up to their normal antics and torturing Percy, Ron was trying to convince Harry that the Chudley Cannons were the greatest Quidditch team in the world, and the two eldest Weasley children were talking with their sister, cracking jokes and making her laugh.

Hermione took the opportunity to sit snugly in Remus' lap while he talked quietly with Sirius, Tonks and Molly. It was so nice to have a father again... Hermione pulled herself from her thoughts as feelings of guilt overcame her. She had no right to love Remus more than her own father. It was horrible of her to even consider the idea.

"Are you alright, Owlet? Is it too loud?" Remus asked her softly. Hermione looked up into his concerned eyes.

"No, Papa Remus. Everything is fine," she replied.

He continued to look at her for a moment. "If you're sure?" She nodded. "Very well then. We should be home soon anyways." He turned back to his conversation with the remaining adults while Hermione snuggled closer to his side. It was moments like this when she truly missed her family, and regretted that Harmony would never know them.

Luckily, Sirius and Remus were turning out to be wonderful father figures, and Tonks was always fun to have around. It was a comfort to the young witch that Harmony would have at least *some* form of family. She shuddered to think that Harmony should ever be trapped with a family like the Dursleys. It was bad enough that Harry had suffered such a terrible fate.

Hermione jumped in her seat when the bus suddenly jerked to a stop. Remus held her close and picked her up before he and the others exited the bus and walked back into Grimmauld Place. The mood was much more subdued than it had been earlier. The twins were strangely silent, and all of them were sombre. Hermione felt guilt creep over her—it was all her fault. They had been so boisterous on the Knight Bus, but at Grimmauld place they were so quiet.

“Well, let’s get this party started,” Sirius said jovially, bringing a few small smiles out. “Come on Harry, presents first, cake later.”

It seemed to break the ice. In no time at all, Fred and George had returned to their childish antics and were relentlessly tormenting Percy. Ginny was trying to get Horace to leave his hiding place under the table, and Bill and Charlie were being surprisingly responsible and helping carry Harry’s gifts into the kitchen and setting them on the table. Harry and Ron were still discussing Quidditch.

Sirius led Harry away from Ron and towards his presents, which he bashfully began to open. Remus stood on the far side of the room, still holding Hermione in his arms. Hermione herself wasn’t sure whether she was pleased or annoyed. She didn’t like that the adults felt she couldn’t handle the situation, but at the same time she was immensely relieved that she wouldn’t have to participate in the activities. It was still a blow to her pride that the adults kept her apart, even though she knew that, given her current state, she would likely have already had another episode if she were taking part in the party. *Being seven doesn’t help very much either.*

Instead, Hermione watched the scene from Remus’ arms, content with her view of what was going on. The first box Harry opened had another set of casual robes for the growing boy. Excitedly snatching the robes, he dashed out of the room, leaving everyone behind, puzzled. A few minutes later, he returned, dressed in his new robes and sporting a grin. He did the same thing with the next box he opened, which contained a set of dress robes, much to everyone’s amusement. He rushed off to change four times before he had opened up all of the boxes with clothes.

Hermione smiled from her place in Remus’ arms and watched the scene with as much amusement as the adults. Next Harry opened a pack of magical sheet music. It was quite extraordinary. It would record the notes to anything Harry played on his piano so that the music he created would never be lost, since he could never recreate one of his songs. Hermione suspected that, while the gift had been given to Harry, it was actually for everyone else, since they adored his music. Nevertheless, Harry had jumped excitedly and waved his

cheerfully about. Ron had been less than impressed, but Hermione recalled that his own musical talents were less than impressive.

After that he had opened up an abundance of wizarding toys and more chocolate frogs than was wise for an already energetic boy to have. The party continued on in much the same fashion, but every so often, Harry would look over and make eye contact with Hermione to be sure that all was well, and she would smile in return.

All in all, Hermione decided, the day wasn't completely horrible. It may have had a bad beginning, but she would face Malfoy a thousand times over to see the light in Harry's eyes shining as brightly as it was when he opened up her gift— a photo album full of pictures of his entire family that she had made with the aid of Remus and Sirius.

Not a bad day, she thought as she watched Harry laughing with Ron, and smiled. *Not a bad day at all.*

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A/N: First, I would like to say that if anyone is truly offended by the "Eventual" part of my summary, I can remove it. I merely meant that Harry and Hermione will not be officially together until the very end of the story. I mean, they're kids right now! They can't be a couple. The very idea is too disgusting to really contemplate. And yes, you read right, they will be together at the end. The epilogue will be set in their seventh year, and the sequel will be life after Hogwarts.

Yes, post traumatic stress disorder can have a delayed onset, though it is rare. There is no *cure*, per se, for PTSD either, though there are several forms of treatments. Symptoms fade over time, but for more serious trauma, PTSD is typically lifelong.

Hermione's circumstances are unusual. First of all, as I've shown you, Hermione dreams of the Dark Harry every night, so her time with the Malfoys doesn't play into her dreams. She is also in counselling, though there isn't much counselling going on since Hermione isn't talking much. Hermione doesn't allow herself to dwell on what happened, and Remus and the others try to keep Hermione and Harry separate from Malfoy.

Well, I'm glad I could update again. I've been running around everywhere, trying to find a train for my nephew. The only thing he really wants, and it's the one thing I can't find. Go figure.

Thank you, everyone who read, and special thanks to those who reviewed. In case I don't get to update again, Happy Holidays everyone!

Cheers,

Madm05

Chapter Twenty Four: Uninvited

Hermione sat curled in a chair, a book open in her lap. Try as she might, she couldn't focus on the Shakespearean play she was trying to read. *Julius Caesar* just couldn't keep her attention, not with the aurors combing the house. Security, they said, though Hermione wasn't sure what half a dozen trainees and one qualified auror could do to protect everyone that Alastor Moody couldn't do. The Ministry had sent them to make sure that everything was safe and sound within the Marauders School for Children, especially since school would be starting again in two weeks time.

Staring unseeingly at the words in her book, she tried to recall the last time they had been at Grimmauld Place to check the safety of the school, but couldn't remember. *They must have come when I wasn't here*, she thought. *Sirius and Papa Remus might have sent Harry and I out into the yard to play. It seems like they always send us outside to play when they have business to discuss. Yes, that's probably what happened.*

Looking at the book, Hermione squirmed. Something was off. There was a strange sense of wrongness in the house, but much to her frustration, she couldn't explain what it was. With a sigh she closed her book. Shutting her eyes, she began to concentrate on Harry. She was sure there was nothing wrong with him— she'd somehow developed a sort of sixth sense in matters concerning her friend— but wanted to be sure all the same. She didn't know where he was, but he wasn't distressed in any way, that much she could tell.

Having decided that reading about Portia stabbing herself in the thigh would do no good, Hermione turned her thoughts to other, more pressing matters. What she was going to do when Draco Malfoy returned to the school in a few days was at the top of her list. Sirius and Remus had said that, for the greater good, it was necessary to keep him at the school, but they would do what was necessary to keep her safe.

Hermione couldn't help but wonder what he had in store for her. She didn't know how Mr. and Mrs. Weasley had chosen to punish him, since the adults decided that she didn't need to know, and she hadn't

had a chance to ask Ron, but she was sure the young Malfoy wouldn't be happy, and that he would blame her.

There was also the matter of how Sirius was treating Harry. He had been very distant with Harry for a while, but then had changed his attitude completely and began to spend more and more time with him. Hermione could see the logic in what he was doing— he was trying to give Harry a positive male figure to look up to, rather than turn to darker ideologies.

She just didn't know if it would work out like Sirius was hoping it would. It could save Harry, she knew, but it would devastate Harry all the more if he were to bond with Sirius, really bond with him, and then lose him should Voldemort rise again. It made her all the more desperate to get her hands on the remaining Horcruxes and prevent Voldemort from regaining his body. In the end, Sirius' good intentions may hurt more than help, if she couldn't help Harry vanquish Voldemort once and for all.

She frowned and set her book aside. Trying to distract herself wasn't working. The niggling feeling that something was wrong would not leave her in peace. Knowing she would get no further in her reading, she stood up and wandered around, hoping that whatever was bothering her would somehow reveal itself to her. She was wandering by one of the sitting rooms on the third floor when she heard someone speaking.

"How many have you done so far?" Someone asked in a low voice. Hermione stopped in her tracks then stepped into the shadows.

"I got three done so far. You?" Another voice replied.

"The same. We have to find the others and get a move on. We don't want them to catch us, now do we?" The first person said.

The other person chuckled. "Indeed. I don't think I'd like to be caught. I might quit training, actually. I wouldn't be able to handle the lecture for failing this mission. Can't say I like this place though. Imagine, a werewolf, teaching kids, and real young ones who can't even defend themselves yet. Makes me glad that they agreed to this."

Hermione felt her temper rising. The auror trainees, who were supposed to be her checking wards and the like, were clearly up to no good. She gritted her teeth and reined in her magic, lest she give herself away. Suddenly she felt a hand on her shoulder. Her heart in her throat, she whirled around, only to find Harry standing behind her. Hermione quickly silenced him by raising a finger to her lips. The pair stood silently and listened further.

"I can't believe it, myself," the first person said gruffly. "Werewolves," he spat. "If it were up to me, I'd lock them all away in silver cages and throw away the key. I hope we'll be able to catch him at something. Then we'd get to ship him off to Azkaban." Hermione was sure that if Harry hadn't set a calming hand on her shoulder that she would have done something she would later regret. She hated that sort of people.

"Aye," the other agreed. "Personally, I can't believe how much magic those two kids do." Hermione felt her stomach twist into as a distant memory came back to her. *We get more reports of magic on that one than any other witch or wizard.* "I'm glad we've got these things here to let us know. All sorts of stuff goes on in this here house. Harry Potter's been doing more and more magic, as well." Things were suddenly spinning out of her control.

"Macnair seemed fairly interested in their magic too," he continued. Hermione felt her blood freeze. If Macnair was aware of how much magic Harry really did, there was trouble on the horizon. "I overheard him talking about it— not like he'd be talking to the likes of me, seeing as I'm just a trainee. But he's awfully interested in them kids. Not that I can blame him. It may not be his department, but I think half the Ministry is interested in the things going on here, especially since it's home to the Boy - Who - Lived and the Wandless - Witch."

Hermione felt sick. If even half of what they had said was true, than she in Harry would have a lot of problems to face in the future. She wanted to sit in the corner and cry— would nothing go right? *Of course not*, she thought bitterly. *Bad luck follows Harry and I around like a lost puppy.*

"Right. Now, did you do the one in this room already?" One asked.

"I was just about to do it before you came in. Just wait a tick. *Introspectio*. There, all done. You ready to move on to the next room? We've got a lot more to do, and time's wasting," the other replied.

"True enough. Let's get moving then," the first replied. Harry and Hermione stood with their backs to the wall, hiding in the shadows as the two aurors left the room and moved on to the next.

Once they were gone, Hermione grabbed Harry's hand and dragged him into the room the two men had just left. She looked around briefly. It was one of the sitting rooms she had never spent any length of time in, since it was often used by the adults. There were a few well-worn chairs and tables and a few photos on the mantle over the fireplace. The room meant little to her at that moment, as she was focused on what the two aurors had said before departing. She could hardly believe her ears. Looking at Harry, she knew that he had come to the same conclusions she had—the trainees were up to something.

"We have to stop them," Hermione said firmly, turning to her friend. For years she had been the smart one, the one who looked before leaping, and as the aurors would learn, Hermione Granger was also a force to be reckoned with when Harry Potter was threatened. They would learn that lesson, just as Rita Skeeter and Marietta Edgecomb before them. She wasn't the most powerful witch in the world, but she could think circles around just about anyone. *She* didn't have the resources to put a stop to them, as she did with Rita and Marietta, but she could certainly put a stop to what they were doing.

"I know, but what are we going to do?" Harry asked in return. "Papa Sirius and Uncle Remus trust us, but I don't think they'd believe us if we told them that the Ministry is spying on us."

Hermione bit her lip, a habit she had tried to break herself of, and failed. She began to wring her hands. "We need proof," she replied.

"The thing!" Harry said excitedly.

"What?" Hermione asked with a frown.

"One of them was talking about a thing, remember? One of them asked the other if he'd done the one in this room," he waved his arm

around. "If we can find this thing, and figure out what they did to it, then we'll have evidence!"

Hermione felt a strong sense of pride in her friend. "That's it, Harry!" She beamed. "From what I understand, they've put some sort of spell on something in this room that will alert the Ministry whenever we do magic," she paused. "Or something. They want to catch Papa Remus doing something when he transforms, so obviously the spell does more than that." Hermione looked around the room. "All we have to do is figure out what it was that they put the spell on."

Harry sighed heavily. "I don't know, Hermione. I mean, I know what your magic feels like, but I don't—"

"You can sense my magic?" She asked sharply.

Harry looked puzzled. "Well, yeah. You're magic is so different from everyone else's, that it's easy to find," he replied.

Hermione licked her lips as she tried to wrap her mind around this new revelation. "Harry," she began. "Do you think you can sense someone else's magic?"

Harry shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other. "I don't know. I've never tried to do that before. I mean, I've felt yours and Papa Sirius' and Uncle Remus', but that's all. Why?"

"Harry," she said softly, trying to remain calm. "You might be able to find whatever it was that they put the spell on!" Harry still looked unsure. Ideas began to whirl around her mind. "If you can feel my magic, you might be able to feel someone else's," she explained. "Everyone has a magical signature that is different from everyone else's. I can't detect any magic, not with my necklace," she touched the Celtic cross hanging around her neck. "But you can. If you can feel magic different from mine, yours, Papa Remus' and Sirius', you'll be able to find whatever it is they put a spell on!"

He swallowed. "I don't know how to do it, Hermione," he said softly. "I'm sorry."

Hermione bit her lip. "Please try Harry." She reached out and grabbed his hand. He shook his head. "Alright then, we'll try something else," she said. "Can you describe to me what my magic feels like to you?"

"It's... it's hard to describe," he replied. "Your magic is bigger than everyone else's, and it's not very calm either. Yours is," he struggled to find the words. "Yours is always moving, so it's very different, but in a way, it's like Uncle Remus' magic."

Hermione saw her chance. "Can you describe Papa Remus' magic to me?"

"Well, his magic is always moving like yours is," Harry replied simply. "But his moves a lot more than yours does, and his is a lot less calm too, but at the same time, it's more calm. Your magic is always moving around, and Uncle Remus' magic doesn't do that, but when his magic moves around, it moves a lot more than yours does." He paused. "His magic isn't as big as yours is though."

Let met think... magic is closely tied to a wizard or witch's aura. The shields, she thought. My magic is 'bigger' because it isn't contained by the shields. That's way my magic is always 'moving' I'll wager—without any shields to stop it, it's always doing something. And Papa Remus, well, he has control over his magic, doesn't he? But he's also a werewolf, which would explain the restless nature of his magic. Hermione looked up at Harry. "What about Uncle Sirius?"

Harry shrugged. "His isn't like yours or Uncle Remus' at all. His doesn't move nearly as much, and it's not as big either."

"Listen to me, Harry," Hermione said, squeezing his hand. "I need you to focus on what magic feels like. I need you to try and find magic that isn't familiar to you, something that you haven't felt very often. Can you do that?"

"I don't know," he seemed terribly ashamed of himself. "What if I do it wrong?" Harry asked, a small amount of fear creeping into his voice.

"Harry," Hermione soothed. "You can do this," she set her hands on his shoulders. "I trust you Harry, I know you can do this."

He stared at her for a long moment before nodding his head in determination and closing his eyes. Hermione felt a great sense of pride in Harry's growing abilities. She hadn't known that he was making leaps and bounds with his magic on his own.

Oh, she had witnessed his slow mastery of magic under her careful eye plenty of times. He was very skilled at making things move around the room now, and was as agile in the air without a broom as he was with one. Harry had even gained more control over his green flames. Whereas before he could only create and extinguish the fire, now he could control what his green flames would do. He was even able to create a butterfly from the flames, though it could not fly. Yet.

And now he's beginning to understand how to sense magic. She smiled at him as he concentrated. All along, all he really needed was the right environment to learn to use his magic. She wanted to fancy herself his teacher, and though she was in many ways, he was making much progress on his own. Professor Snape made him feel like he was inadequate, but all he needed was a little help to get started. Now he's quickly turning into a powerful wizard, and he's only just turned seven.

"Not that, no, not there," he was mumbling, his brow furrowed in concentration. "No, that's not it, that's wrong, not there, no..." Suddenly his eyes snapped open. "There!" Harry pointed to a picture on the mantle. It was a photo of Harry's parents on their wedding day.

They had no right! Hermione thought darkly. *To spy on us by putting a spell on that picture! Surely they know how much it would mean to everyone in this house!* Hermione fumed silently on behalf of her friend. "We need to find one of the grownups," she said, changing her focus to the problem at hand.

"What if they don't believe us? I mean, we're just kids. Grownups never believe kids," Harry replied softly, his insecurities returning full force.

"We'll just have to make them think they figured it out," she said grimly.

"But how?" Harry frowned in thought.

"I don't know. Maybe, maybe we can get them to come in here and cast some spells on it? Maybe we can get them to find out themselves? Then they would think that they found out on their own. That could work," Hermione murmured. "Yes, that's what we'll have to do. Let's split up and try and find either of them and bring them here. We'll have to say we saw one of the aurors casting a spell on it, and that we want to know what they did or some such rubbish."

"Will they believe that?" Harry asked.

Hermione's eyes lit up. "The spell! We both heard the incantation— it was *Introspectio*. If we tell them the spell, they should be able to put everything together and figure it all out. That would work, wouldn't it?"

Harry nodded. "Right, but we'd better stick together then. It would look funny if we both heard the same thing and didn't show up together." He gestured to the open door. Understanding what he meant, Hermione moved towards the door, Harry following closely behind. They continued through the house, searching for their adopted fathers to set their plan into action and save themselves from even more trouble in the future. It wasn't long before they heard Sirius talking.

"As I said, we spoke with Alastor Moody about the wards. I'm sure you're well aware of Alastor's skills as an auror. He told my partner, Remus Lupin, and myself the best wards to use in order to create a secure environment for the children. Given his expertise in the area of safety, I'm sure you can understand why I've used many of his suggestions. Further, Remus Lupin specializes in defence against the Dark Arts, so it is easy to see that we have certainly taken the proper precautions to protect our students." They could hear Sirius' agitated voice through the door. "It is completely safe here, at *any* time of the month, I assure you."

"Papa Remus," she whispered. "He's a werewolf." Hermione turned to Harry. "They want to cause problems because he's a werewolf."

"That's silly," Harry scowled. "He can't help it that he's a werewolf. It's not like he went out during a full moon and said 'hey Mister Werewolf, bite me' or anything silly like that."

Hermione smiled at his word choice. "No, he certainly didn't." Despite her amusement, she felt another surge of pride in her friend. He was developing into a wonderful person. Part of her had been afraid that Harry would turn into the spoiled brat Professor Snape claimed he was in her own time, if he were not raised the same way. *Silly*, she chided herself as she looked at him. *As if he could be anything else!* Hermione decided to pretend that she knew nothing concerning the Dark Harry. "Ready?" She asked instead.

Harry nodded firmly and pushed the door open. "Papa Sirius!" He called loudly, startling everyone, even Hermione. Harry never spoke out of turn. He always waited patiently for a lull in the conversation to say what he wanted to say or to ask his question. That he would just walk in and talk was highly unusual. "Papa Sirius," he said again. "What does *Introspectio* mean?"

Sirius' eyes narrowed when he heard the incantation. The auror that was talking to Sirius paled dramatically. Sirius, who had noticed the auror's pallid complexion frowned. "Where did you hear that, Harry?"

"One of the horrors said it." Harry replied promptly. Hermione smiled a little at his word choice, distantly remembering his sixth birthday. "He pointed his wand at a picture of my mum and dad, and said *Introspectio*. It sounds like Latin, but I haven't learned that word yet. What does it mean?" Hermione mentally applauded her friend's quick thinking. His story was really quite clever. "Hermione heard it too, didn't you Hermione?"

"Yes," she agreed immediately. "Though it seemed more like a spell to me, since he did have his wand."

"Is that so?" Sirius asked through gritted teeth. "Harry, why don't you show me where you were when you saw the *horror*. Hermione, why don't you go get your Papa Remus? He's in the kitchen with Harmony." He turned to the auror. "And why don't you accompany Harry and I?"

The auror swallowed, his eyes darting back and forth between Sirius and the door. *Idiot*, Hermione thought darkly as she turned away to get her adopted father. *If you act like you've been caught, it only lets*

people know that you really are guilty. Mentally rolling her eyes, Hermione set off for the kitchen in search of Remus.

Walking down a hallway, an auror spotted her and gave her a strange look. For a moment she feared he would try to stun her, but she passed unharmed and soon found herself in the kitchen. Remus was sitting in a chair with his back to her and Harmony laughing in his lap.

"Papa Moo!" She giggled. "Want a dwink, Papa Moo!"

Remus laughed heartily. "A *dwink*, eh? Well what do you want, little Dewdrop? Do you want some milk to *dwink*, or some water?"

"Mick!" Harmony exclaimed, clapping her hands. "Mick!"

Hermione pulled herself together. She didn't have time to watch Harmony play with Remus, adorable though it was. "Papa Remus," she called softly. "Uncle Sirius wants to see you in one of the sitting rooms." She bit her lip and looked up into his curious eyes. "Harry and I were walking when we heard one of the aurors talking. He pointed his wand at one of the photos of Harry's mum and dad and said a word, said *Introspectio* and Harry and I wanted to know what it meant, so we went to tell Uncle Sirius." By that time the werewolf's face was as white as a sheet. "He sent me to get you."

"Just a moment, Hermione," Remus replied before standing and putting Harmony in play pen in the kitchen.

"Papa Moo!" Harmony complained with a pout. She stretched her arms up, wanting to be held again. Remus ignored her and turned to retrieve a small cup of milk, charmed to prevent being spilled, and handed it to the young child before dropping a quick kiss on her forehead.

"I'll be back soon, Harmony, I promise. Alright, Hermione," Remus said, turning back to her. "Show me where they are." Hermione nodded and grabbed his hand. Pulling him out of the room and ignoring Harmony's protests, she led him down the hallway towards the sitting room where she had first discovered the Ministry's deceit.

"It's this way, Papa Remus," Hermione told him as she pulled him up a flight of stairs. It was an unnecessary comment, but it seemed like something an eight year old would do. In the back of her mind, she prayed that Harry was alright. The auror had looked more than a little panicked when she left, and she only hoped that he didn't try anything that could cause harm to her family. She shook away the odd feeling that she had about referring to them as her family. Part of her was comforted by the idea of having a family, while another part of her felt that she was betraying her parent by being a part of a different family and enjoying it.

"They're in this room," she said, pointing needlessly to the room. From where she was, she could see Sirius standing, his face red as she faced the auror. Harry, who was standing quietly in the corner, was watching the two men, his eyes flickering from one to the other. Hermione breathed a sigh of relief that Harry was unharmed. Worrying about Harry was like breathing for her— it came naturally. *Harry is such high maintenance*, she thought as Remus stepped around her and into the room. She smiled a little as she followed her adopted father. *But I wouldn't trade my Harry for anyone else.*

"...And you and the Ministry felt the need to spy on my family *why* exactly?" Sirius asked through gritted teeth.

"What's going on?" Remus asked as he stepped closer to Sirius.

"It would seem that the Ministry felt that they had to monitor our house," Sirius said stiffly. "*Without* informing us."

I wish I were older, Hermione thought as Remus bared his teeth and growled in a wolfish fashion. *Then I could do something useful instead of just standing here, watching what happens. Wandless magic or not, I can't get too involved, I can't draw even more attention to myself, even if I can't stand being useless!*

"And why would they do that!" Remus snarled rather than asked. Hermione shared a look with Harry— both of them knew that, with the full moon only two days away, Remus would be very temperamental. Harry was too far away, but Hermione knew she was close enough to calm the werewolf down.

Hermione casually walked up to Remus and slipped her hand into his much larger one and leaned against him. It was something she had done to her father when she thought he wasn't feeling well, or had a rough day at the dentistry. She would never be sure why the stance had brought her father comfort, but it had always soothed him. *Perhaps, she thought, leaning on him let my father know that someone needed him Or maybe it's just the contact.* To her relief, it also seemed to soothe Remus, for whatever reason.

Remus cleared his throat and drew in a deep, calming breath. "And why would they need to do that?" He asked, his voice calmer and he reined in his fierce temper, though Hermione could see fury flash in his eyes for the briefest of moments.

The auror drew himself up and puffed out his chest. "The Ministry felt that it would be wise to monitor everything that happens within this establishment for the purpose of protecting and ensuring the safety of the children in your care for the majority of the year. For that reason, we have been putting surveillance charms on various items thought out the house to be sure that no harm comes to any who are in your care," he said, giving Harry and pointed look before turning his gaze to Hermione.

"We would never harm the children," Remus snarled.

"Your tone says differently, *sir*," the auror spat contemptuously. "It's a good thing that we've been watching the occupants of this house. While the two of you haven't done anything yet, my co-workers and I have noticed that *both* of your adopted children have been using magic frequently. Now, unless the boy has a wand— which would be illegal, given his age— then he too is using wandless magic and that is of great interest to my colleagues at the Ministry.

"Consequently, if it is true that the boy is using wandless magic, I find it most interesting then that you didn't come forward to inform the Wizengamot about your boy's skill. That's withholding information from the proper authorities, Mr. Black. The boy's new found ability had caught the interest of many officials. They would like to question him in regard to his ability."

Remus growled. "Why you—"

"Watch what you say, *werewolf*, or I'll have you hogtied in silver chains," the auror hissed.

Remus drew back sharply, his grip on Hermione's hand tightening. His breathing became erratic as a tick developed in his left eye. Hermione suddenly feared for her adopted father. The auror would get what he deserved, Sirius held enough sway with the Wizengamot to ensure that the Ministry would face severe consequences for their illegal spying, but Remus, she feared, may very well do something for which he would never forgive himself.

Before she could act, the auror found himself bound in thick, black cords. "I would caution you against threatening those who live in *my* house," Sirius said, his voice a deadly whisper. "For an auror, you really are quite foolish. First, you violate the Res Familiaris Decree of 284 by invading my home and invading my privacy by spying on me and my family when you have not been given adequate reason. Then you tell me that you've been spying for a year, and from what you've just said, you intend to try and blackmail me into submission."

Sirius stood over the fallen auror. "I'll have your job for this, yours and your colleagues. You have knowingly violated a law, and more, you have attempted to use blackmail on the occupants of this household." He tisked. "Funny how you told me everything just a moment ago. Did you think you could intimidate me? I'll tell you what, *friend*, you're not half as frightening as the Dementors, and I have no doubt you and those involved will be paying them a visit soon."

"Oi," an auror said as he stepped into the room, his wand at the ready. "What's going on in here?" He demanded, nodding to his superior.

"Ah, Bertram, I believe?" Sirius said. Hermione took a step towards Harry, still holding her adopted father's hand. "I was just explaining to your commanding officer here that your presence here is quite illegal."

"Oh yes," Remus added as the second auror began to pale. "Quite illegal. Spying on a family via observing spells placed on several objects throughout a household without said family's knowledge goes against regulation."

"B-but I was told it was legal," he said, his voice tinged with confusion. Hermione looked into his eyes, letting her Legilimency do it's job. "We were told that it was a training mission that you had agreed to. We were to put traces on a twenty five items throughout the house. Our task was to find the objects and recast the tracing spell without you catching us. I swear Mr. Black, that's the truth. I didn't have any idea that this wasn't a training session."

"He's telling the truth," Hermione said softly to Remus. The werewolf, who had calmed considerably, nodded slowly as he looked down at her, understanding. *Of course, he has no idea I can use Legilimency. He probably thinks it was a vision.*

"I believe him Sirius," Remus said to his friend, giving other man a significant look before glancing at Hermione. Sirius nodded, understanding what the werewolf meant. It was funny that she hadn't thought of using the excuse of having a vision earlier. She supposed, though, that she could only use the 'vision' reason so many times before it lost it's credibility. It was better to save those 'visions' for another time.

"If you say so, Remus." Sirius turned back to the other man. "Well Bertram, why don't you go and gather all of your team mates and bring them to the kitchen. It would seem we have a great deal to discuss."

"Wotcher," Tonks said as she came into the room, Harmony in her arms and pulling her hair. "What's going on? I pop in for a visit and find little Harmony crying her eyes out and can't find everyone else."

Sirius sighed. "I can see that this will require more explanation than I had originally thought. Alright, Dora, let's all head to the kitchen. We'll fill you in when we fill the trainees in on what's been going on. After that, we can decide what we're going to do."

He turned to Harry and Hermione. "Well, it's a good thing you wanted to learn a new word, Harry," Sirius grinned. "You've been spending too much time with Hermione."

“Not possible,” Harry replied earnestly. “Hermione’s super fun and super smart. There’s no way anyone can spend too much time with her.”

Sirius, Remus and Tonks laughed at his words, while Hermione blushed a brilliant shade of red. “If you say so, Little Prongs. Your Uncle Remus and your Aunt Dora and I are going to have a chat with our guests, and we’ll be bringing Dante here with us,” he nodded to the bound auror. “You two can go outside and spend some time with your horses, but remember—”

“No riding,” Harry and Hermione chorused together.

Sirius grinned at them. “That’s right. Now, off you two go. Moony, Dora, we’d better be on our way as well. We have a long discussion ahead of us. Hey Moony, why don’t you floo Moody. We’ll give him the report, and he can get everyone’s stories on what they were told.” The group set off, Sirius mumbling about wizarding politics, Remus growling about prejudice, and Tonks cooing over Harmony.

“What do you think will happen now?” Harry asked softly. “They know I can do magic like you can.”

Hermione sighed and ran her fingers through her hair. “I don’t know, Harry, I just don’t know.” She suddenly felt very tired.

“It’s like it’s never going to end,” Harry murmured. “It’s like everyone wants me or you or me and you, and I don’t know why.” He shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other. “I’m afraid, Hermione. What if they separate us, all of us? What if they take me away from you and Papa Sirius and Uncle Remus? Or what if they take you away from us like they did before?”

Hermione looked at her friend solemnly, not knowing how to console him. For once, she decided not to worry about her troubles. It was bad enough that she was still trying to decide when to ‘discover’ the Room of Requirement at Hogwarts, she didn’t need to worry about everything else.

But you do, that irritating voice in the back of her mind told her. Harry is in danger. Again. He needs to be protected. He's too young to face the Ministry, or a Death Eater. He was too young to face Malfoy.

Hermione sighed. "There isn't anything we can do Harry," she said, taking his hand in hers to offer what comfort she could. "We're just kids." *We're just kids*, she thought, hating herself for having to admit it. Children were powerless. No one believed children, because they were prone to exaggerating or misjudging what really happened, or lying altogether. For all of her knowledge, and for all of the control she had gotten over her magic, little though it was, she was powerless. Sirius and Remus put a lot of trust in her, but she knew that trust would only go so far.

"Papa Remus and Uncle Sirius will take care of everything," she assured him. "They can't take us away, because they weren't supposed to be here spying on us anyways. What I'm more worried about is the Ministry knowing about what you can do," she said softly, mindful of the enchanted photo of Lily and James Potter.

"Voldemort's followers in the Ministry," Harry nodded his understanding. He had apparently forgotten that the spell on the photo was still in place. Hermione quickly silenced him and nodded to the picture before leading him out of the room. "Let's go to the stables," he suggested.

Hermione nodded and followed, lost in her thoughts. Macnair knew. Who else would know? Voldemort had kept the identity of many of his followers a secret so that they could not reveal too many if they were caught, so Macnair would not be able to tell many people... but it was possible that he would tell a few, who would tell a few others... and the cycle would continue. Then there was the fact that another Death Eater could know, or a Death Eater sympathiser. She didn't know what she would do.

Harry and Hermione spent several hours outside with Gloria and Archimedes. Neither one of them wanted to go inside while Sirius, Remus and Tonks were talking with aurors, so they remained outdoors. After a while, they began to play games. They would stare at the clouds and try to figure out what they looked like. They would

take turns telling each other stories— Harry told one about a dog that couldn't bark, but could quack like a duck, while Hermione told one about two friends rescuing a young girl from a troll.

Neither mentioned the aurors or the Ministry, or the possible trouble to come. They spent their time enjoying the day. As Hermione watched Harry while he dozed, she wondered if, perhaps, that warm summer day was the calm before the storm. Deciding to stick to her earlier resolution, she pushed her thoughts away, and allowed herself to let her mind drift to other, more pleasant matters, like enjoying the sunshine while she could.

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A/N: I'm so sorry for not updating sooner. I tried to find time, but I forgot that the weeks following Christmas are swarmed with birthdays in my family. I've bouncing from one party to the next. On top of that, college started up again, so time is limited again.

Ah, I'm glad I got to finish this chapter. It almost killed me every time I got a review from the chapter *Dirty* and everyone kept asking me about how the Ministry was watching them. That's one more loose end I've wrapped up.

Latin translations in this chapter: *Introspectio* means to look into , look inside, **observe**, examine, and Res Familiaris means private property

A word about Ron. He's staying. Personally, I'm ambivalent about Ron. He has his moments when he's likeable, and he has his moments when I wish he would just go away. I felt it was important, however, that Hermione seek to include him. After all, it is a very Hermione-ish thing to do, including Ron. I think it fits her personality, and while I have taken a few liberties with canon, I try to make every one act as in-character as possible.

One final thing before I go. One of my favourite authors, DarkGoddess2002, has written a fantastic story called *Chilling*. It contains a Dark Hermione, which is always fun, and is very well written. It's a one shot (though I think it should be longer or have a sequel), and is very much worth the time it takes to read it. So, if you're feeling froggy, go for it.

Until next time. Thanks to everyone who read last time, and special thanks to everyone who reviewed. Please review!

Cheers,

Madm05

Chapter Twenty Five: Homework

"Ginny, I swear if you keep acting like yourself, I'm not going to help you sneak sweets from Mum and Dad anymore!" A boy shouted loudly on the other side of the room. His face was turning as red as his hair as he scowled at his sister.

Hermione sighed and went back to multiplying her fractions. The work was easy, but it was, after all, a review for the second day of school. *Maybe they'll let me do basic algebra this year*, she thought with a glimmer of hope. *That would be nice*. Fractions, while more entertaining than simple addition, were hardly a challenge.

"Oh yes you will so! If you don't help me, then *you* won't get any sweets either!" Ginny yelled. "Who would distract Mum and Dad for you?"

Hermione continued to ignore them, but she wasn't really focused on her work, not that she really needed to focus. Sirius and Remus and gone before the Wizengamot earlier that day about the unauthorized spying on Grimmauld Place. She wouldn't find out the verdict until they returned later that evening, if they decided to tell her at all. It was so bothersome being a child. She didn't even get a chance to read the *Daily Prophet* anymore.

"I'll get Harry and Hermione to help me," Ron replied. "They're good at sneaking stuff."

The sofa shifted from the added weight as Harry sat down. "What are they fighting about now?" Harry asked, looking at Ron and Ginny facing off, the brother - sister duo oblivious to Harry and Hermione sitting on the other side of the room. Spats between Ron and Ginny were so common place that most of the occupants in the house didn't notice, or simply left the room.

"Ginny wants Ron to play with her, but he won't do it because she's a girl and he doesn't want anyone to make fun of him for playing with her." Hermione gave her companion a wry look. "Somehow, he forgot I was a girl, as he doesn't mind spending time with me."

“Nuh uh! Harry is a hero, and heroes don’t just go around taking sweets! They give them away! He’s a hero! He beat You - Know - Who!” Ginny stomped her foot defiantly.

“I’m glad I’m not your brother, Hermione,” Harry said as he watched Ron and Ginny argue.

Hermione looked away from her work for the first time and looked at Harry. “Why?” She asked. “Because we’re betrothed?”

Harry squirmed. “I don’t like fighting with you,” he said. “And Ron and Ginny are always fighting, and Ron is Ginny’s brother. If I were your brother, I’d have to fight with you all the time, and I don’t want to do that.”

“He would so! And well, Hermione would make sure we had a good plan, even if she didn’t help us. You’re just dumb. You don’t know what you’re talking about!” Ron snapped back.

“I’m glad you’re not my brother too, Harry,” she smiled a little as she looked at him. “Besides, the idea of marrying my brother is sickening.” Hermione wrinkled her nose at the very thought, and was very relieved that Harry wasn’t her brother. Ron, out of everyone, acted like a brother to her. Neville, to a certain degree, was like a little brother—someone she needed to look after.

Harry nodded. “Do you think I should try and get them to stop?”

“I do so know what I’m talking about. You’re the one who doesn’t know what you’re saying. *You’re dumb!*” Ginny huffed.

“Oh yeah? Well you’re dumber!”

“Well then you’re dumbest!”

“You— well you’re—” Ron sputtered. “You’re dumber-est!”

“That was a snappy comeback,” Hermione murmured as she set her work aside. “You’re right, Harry, we should stop this before it gets ugly.”

Harry stood and walked beside her, ready to help her. Privately, Hermione adored that quality about Harry— he was always willing to lend her a hand when she need one, and even if she didn't, he was always there to help.

"What's going on?" Harry asked cautiously. Ron and Ginny, both of their faces red with fury, were glaring at each other. Ron's fists were clenched at his sides, and Ginny's hands were on her hips.

"Ron's being dumb!" Ginny replied, still glaring at her brother. "He won't play with me, and he promised he would."

"Did not," Ron protested indignantly. "And I'm not dumb!"

"Do you ever stop fighting?" A new voice interrupted. "I swear, listening to you two is enough to make my ears bleed."

Hermione looked up and struggled to suppress a shudder. Malfoy was standing in the doorway, Crabbe and Goyle on either side of him. As word of the school's success spread, more people became interested. *Either that, or the Purebloods have all decided to send their kids here to spend time with Malfoy to corrupt him, remind him of his heritage and make him believe that he's better than everyone because of it and whatnot.*

Crabbe and Goyle snickered at Malfoy's words, strongly reminding Hermione of times long past, or in her situation, times to come.

"What's going on in here?" Pansy Parkinson asked as she entered the room, a glass of water in her hands.

"There's a Weasel fight," Draco sneered.

Ron's ears went red. In a blind rage, he charged at the blonde hair boy, but was held back by Harry, Hermione, and Ginny. "You— you shut up about my name!"

"Leave," Harry said, his voice quiet but commanding. Though he was only seven years old, his time with his family had given him a bit of confidence that grew every day. Hermione was reminded of the Dark Harry— he, too, used that tone, but for far more nefarious deeds.

Draco sneered at the sharp edge of Harry's command, but turned and left just the same.

"What was that about?" Pansy asked Ginny.

"Ron's being a butt," Ginny replied. "And Draco saw it. Come on, Pansy. I brought my dolly with me. We can have a tea party." Ginny sniffed and walked away.

"Oh! I brought a dolly too!" Pansy said excitedly as she followed. "And I brought my tea set, so we can have even more fun serving them. Do you think anyone else would like to join us? Maybe..." Her voice trailed away.

"You know," Ron said as he watched them walk into another room. "Girls are scary. They can be mean one minute, and gone playing dollies the next." Hermione frowned at him. "Don't worry, Hermione, I didn't forget you. You're scary too, just without the dollies and with some books."

"Thanks Ron," Hermione said dryly while Harry snickered.

"You're welcome," he replied with a smile.

Hermione smiled in return. Ron was thick, but he was very caring now that he felt he could count Harry and Hermione as his friends. Hermione was just glad that Harry wasn't taking everything Ron said seriously. A few months ago, Harry would have tackled Ron for saying such a thing to her. "Come on," she said. "We might as well do—"

"Don't say homework," Ron interrupted, his tone pleading. "Please don't say homework."

"I don't know, Ron," Harry said with a grin. "I've got a few arithmetic problems I need to do yet. Maybe we should do our homework."

"That's the spirit Harry," Hermione laughed as Ron groaned and buried his head in his hands.

"Hey," a new voice chimed breathlessly. "Hey, do you want to play gobstones?" Neville asked. "The new boy, Cormac McLaggen brought a set to show everyone. He says he's the best at gobstones, and that he can beat anyone. We all want to try and see if he really is that good at it. Do you want to come? He's in the game room."

Both boys turned to Hermione pleadingly. "Oh alright, we'll go. You two can play, I'll watch."

"When she says she'll watch," Harry said in a stage whisper, "she really means she'll read." He grinned. "Or do homework."

"Ha ha," Hermione said blandly, but still grabbed the assignment on fractions she had been working on before Ron and Ginny got into yet another argument. *Ron and Ginny argue nearly as much as Ron and I did*, she thought absently. "Let's go."

The boys cheered and followed Neville. Ron eagerly kept pace with Neville, but Harry continually looked back to be sure she was following. Walking, she couldn't help but ponder the dramatic changes that had already occurred between this timeline and her own.

Harry, Ron, and Neville had so much more confidence now. It was heartening to see them when they were together. Harry, finally having a loving family, was allowed to be normal, so long as he wasn't in the eye of the public. In the privacy of the school, far away from their parents, the children were allowed to meet Harry and understand what he was like as a person. They didn't have a set of beliefs about him based on the stories their parents told them before bed.

Ron himself had grown up dramatically. Hermione had expected him to behave much as he had when they were at Hogwarts, but he didn't. He was as amusing as ever, and still adored Quidditch, but it was as if having friends gave him as much confidence as having a family had given Harry. From what she could guess, Ron hadn't had very many friends before Hogwarts, and was always being compared to his brothers.

Hermione was sure that Molly Weasley had never meant to make her son feel inadequate, but the older woman had. Surely the Weasley Matron had no idea of the grief she would cause her son. But now, in

this school, Ron had friends and had time away from his mother's attentions and comparisons. He had time to grow as a person, and grow he did.

Neville was much like Ron. Away from his domineering grandmother and surrounded by boys his own age, who didn't ridicule him and question his magical abilities, Neville was growing up just fine. He would never be any good at Quidditch, or any sport really, and he had a habit of stammering when his grandmother spoke to him. Away from the Quidditch Pitch and his grandmother, however, Neville was a very spirited lad. And, Hermione was amused to find, he loved to play in the dirt.

"Would you care for tea, Mrs. Benwick?" Pansy asked. Hermione glanced into another room and saw Pansy Parkinson, Hannah Abbott, Luna Lovegood and Ginny Weasley, each of them with a doll and a teacup far too small for them to really be using, having a tea party. That was another miracle in and of itself.

The school had expanded a little. Percy Weasley, Oliver Wood and Penelope Clearwater had left the school to enter Hogwarts, but five others had entered. Vincent Crabbe and Gregory Goyle had been two of the more unpleasant additions. Hannah Abbott was another addition, like Pansy Parkinson. Cormac McLaggen was the fifth.

Surprisingly, Pansy remembered meeting Ginny the year before at the Ministry's attempt to endear themselves to the Boy - Who - Lived, the Wandless - Witch, and the Man - They - Wrongfully - Locked - In - Azkaban. Upon her arrival, and after her parents' departure, she had approached Ginny Weasley and the two had hit it off. They had quickly teamed up with Luna and Hannah, forming what was quickly becoming known as the Gaggles of Giggling Girls. Privately, Hermione thought Luna's giggle was more of a twitter, but she didn't say anything.

Hermione was sure that if someone had told her that Pansy was really a nice person when she was in her fourth year, she would have given them directions to the Hospital Wing. Luna was surprisingly sociable. She still had a flighty sort of personality, but she seemed to be more grounded. Hannah, ever bashful, had spoken more in the

last two days than Hermione could ever remember her saying while at Hogwarts. Ginny, too, was maturing as she gathered friends.

“Think you can beat me? Ha! Just because you’re Harry Potter doesn’t mean anything! I can beat anyone, anytime.” Cormac McLaggen announced loudly. Hermione wrinkled her nose and wondered how she could have allowed herself to go to Slughorn’s party with him, let alone let him actually kiss her. The thought was nauseating.

Harry looked confused. “I never said that,” he replied, still a little puzzled. “I just said I wanted to play a round with you. I never said I was better than you were.”

“You’re Harry Potter,” Cormac sneered. “Of course you think you’re better than everyone else.”

Harry flushed and gritted his teeth. “I don’t think I’m better than you are,” he ground out. “But I would still like to play a game of gobstones with you.” Hermione could tell that he was having trouble keeping his temper— and his magic— from getting out of control.

Hermione continued to watch carefully, well aware of the damage her friend could do when he truly lost control, and prepared to intervene if necessary. It was common knowledge that a magical child would lose control of their magic and cause all sorts of trouble, but Harry, whose emotions were always unstable courtesy of the Dursleys, had incidents of accidental magic more frequently, and they were more volatile.

Seeing him try to control his temper— and if the wobbling vase on the table was any judge, failing— she wondered what the Harry from her first life would have done, before he had become a Dark Lord. He had been so closed off with his emotions. He refused to talk about Sirius, and only spoke of what happened to Cedric to the headmaster, then later to Rita Skeeter and herself in an attempt to gain public support. Would he have succeeded in controlling his emotions? *Perhaps*, she thought. *But there is a big difference between controlling your emotions, and hiding them. He might have controlled his anger, or he might have hidden it.*

“Very well,” Cormac drawled. Hermione shivered at the tone— it was so like the one Malfoy used. “Let’s play.” He grinned cockily, sure he would win. The young witch barely managed to keep herself from humiliating him and taking him down a peg or two. He was arrogant as a child, and he was arrogant as a teenager. His attitude was enough to make her want to scream.

As it was, she had to settle for watching the two boys compete, determined not to interfere with the game no matter how much she wanted to wipe that smirk off of the Cormac’s face. Though Cormac was a year older than Harry, he was incredibly rude and outspoken. Hermione didn’t think anyone would mind if he lost to Harry, especially since Harry was well liked by almost everyone.

“—I never would have dreamed it would have gone so swimmingly. Did you see the look on Dumbledore’s face when all of those trainees testified? I’ve never seen him so angry in my life.” Sirius voice was coming from the entry hall.

“So what happens now?” She heard Tonks ask.

“Well, the trainees will be fine,” Remus said. “We weren’t pressing charges against them anyways, so it doesn’t matter. Now, the auror in charge of the mission or whatever you want to call it, Dante, he’ll probably be stripped of his rank, blacklisted, and will likely spend some time in Azkaban for his crimes. The Ministry itself is more complicated. There will have to be a thorough investigation to determine who all was involved in the spying, and then it will have to be determined who was forced to take part—who was following orders to keep their job— and who was doing it out of spite. From there, the Wizengamot will determine the severity of each person’s actions, and decide a fitting punishment for them.”

“Who will be doing the investigating? Surely not the Ministry,” Tonks asked, curious.

“Certainly not,” Remus answered. “No, it will be an independent branch that was set up the same time as the Ministry, for just this very purpose. Of course, it’s never *really* been used to the extent that it’s about to be used.”

Sirius chuckled. "We've caused quite a bit of trouble for the Ministry. Now if only I could push those social reforms through the Wizengamot, we'd be set."

"Good luck," Remus snorted. "You'll have better luck winning freedom for house - elves than you will trying to get more rights for werewolves." He sounded tired, and more than a little bitter. "But that's just the way it is."

"Don't worry Remus," Tonks said reassuringly. "If anyone can do it, Sirius can. Personally, I can't believe how active you've become, what with being a headmaster and being a member of the Wizengamot."

"I can't do very much yet. I'm one of the lower chairs," Sirius said. "And the only reason I have chair on the Wizengamot is because of my lineage. It's disgustingly pure, and my father used to line the pockets of several members."

"Give it a few years, Padfoot. Seniority— you'll move up in rank as the years go by, and then you will hold more sway with the others. That's just how it is. Until then, remaining active and keeping yourself in the eye of the public will win you favour hopefully, but I don't think you'll get far with the werewolf legislation you're trying to push through..."

Hermione frowned as their voices faded away. So the Ministry was in chaos. That was nothing new. It had been in a similar state when Crouch Senior first became Minister. She wondered what role he had played in the spying catastrophe. Did he know? Did he order it? Or was it done without his knowledge? It was possible, she supposed. His regime was still fairly new, especially because of the chaos that had followed her stay at Malfoy Manor. It would have been easy to take advantage of.

She shuddered. Had McNair ordered the mission? He was a loyal Death Eater, one she couldn't expose, not yet. It made sense that he would play some role... but which one? If he had instigated the matter— and if he were caught— that would take care of him. But if he wasn't the reason the Ministry was spying on them, or if he wasn't

caught, then she and Harry were in a very precarious position indeed. There was no telling how much he knew, or who he would tell.

A sudden thought struck— had he already told someone? Hermione swallowed, fear roiling in the pit of her stomach. What would she do if Death Eaters came? What *could* she do? *Relax*, she thought to herself when she saw a vase tremor out of the corner of her eye. *You're getting yourself worked up over nothing. It would be foolish to think that the Death Eaters would attack here. This school is protected too well. The wards may not be up to Hogwarts standard, but they're nothing to laugh at.* She breathed a sigh of relief.

"Beginner's luck," she heard Cormac snap. "That's all that was, beginner's luck. I challenge you to another round."

"Alright," Harry said with a nod. The boys around Harry and Cormac cheered. "I'll play you another round."

Hermione rolled her eyes and slipped away. Remus and Sirius were back. The trial was successful. There was a chance that McNair could be locked in Azkaban, hopefully soon. The boys were being boys. All in all, it seemed like things were going well. Nodding to herself, she sat in her chair and picked up her fractions work again. Wrinkling her nose a little at the simple arithmetic, she set to work, finally able to focus on the assignment. She had only managed to get halfway through her work when her mind began to wander.

Harry was getting better at wandless magic. As she had expected, he wasn't as good as she was, but he had enough raw magical power that he could do some fairly complex magic. His favourite use for his magic was flying, but then, Harry adored flying, with or without a broom.

Other than flying, he was becoming frustrated with his progress. He was able to summon larger items faster than he was before, and he now had complete control over the green flames he conjured, but that seemed to be the limit. While Hermione was amazed that he had managed so much, Harry was upset that he couldn't turn a bullfrog into a rock as she had done the other day. He had apparently forgotten that she had done it on accident when it had startled her.

Hermione herself was becoming frustrated with her own progress. Usually she worked on trying to change an object's colour without giving herself a splitting headache, or simple transfiguration, such as turning a match into a needle. That latter spell was one she had easily mastered in her first year, but now, even when she had had years of experience, she still had difficulty. The best she had managed was turning the match into a piece of grey cardboard shaped like a needle.

For her friend's benefit, she began to focus on what else he could learn rather than her own stumbling block. Hermione tapped her chin thoughtfully. *Maybe he can learn to change something's size*, she thought. *Transfiguration is a very difficult discipline, even with a wand, so that may be why he can't get any further. Maybe he needs to take smaller steps. Changing something's size would be a good start, I think.*

Hermione was startled from her thoughts by the sound of yelling coming from the room where she knew the boys were playing gobstones. Frowning, she stood and quickly made her way to the other room. The kids were all gathered around in a scene reminiscent of kids watching a fight.

"I did not!" Harry yelled over the din.

Oh dear, what's going on now, she wondered and began to push through the others to get to Harry.

"You tell him Harry!"

"That's right Harry!"

"Yeah Harry!"

Hermione sighed in frustration and tried to worm her way around Zacharias Smith and Marietta Edgecomb. She was jostled as the others moved and cheered.

"Of course you cheated! There's no way you could have won three games in a row against me!" Cormac yelled.

"I would never cheat, and even if I would, I couldn't have! You were watching me the whole time, and so was everyone else!" Harry replied, just as loudly. Hermione finally managed to break through the crowd. Harry and Cormac were facing each other. Both were flushed with anger, though Cormac could have been embarrassed as well.

"What's going on in here?" A new voice sounded. Everyone immediately quieted as the headmaster walked in. He saw the angry stances of the two boys and stepped between them. There was a slight glimmer of panic in his eyes when he saw Harry was one of the two involved. "Hermione," Sirius said. "What is going on?"

"I don't know, Headmaster Black," she said honestly, careful to address Sirius by his title while school was in session. "I was doing my arithmetic homework when I heard shouting. I came to see what was going on, but I couldn't see anything. I could hear Harry and Cormac arguing. Cormac accused Harry of cheating at gobstones, and Harry denied it, saying that he wouldn't have cheated, and couldn't have because of everyone who was watching. Then you came in, sir." Hermione reported dutifully.

"Is that true, Neville?" Sirius asked the young boy.

"Y-yes sir, it's true. That's what happened," Neville replied.

"They're lying!" Cormac interrupted. "*She*," he pointed to Hermione. "Is his betrothed, so of course she's going to lie for him. *They*," he gestured to everyone around him. "Are all his friends, so of course they're going to lie for him too! They're all lying!"

"That's not true!" Harry snapped. "Hermione doesn't lie, and neither do I, so don't you talk about us like that! And Neville, Neville's always honest, and so is Ron!" Hermione smiled a little at Harry's defence of his friend's honour, but remained silent— she didn't have the heart to point out that earlier Ron had been arguing with Ginny and talking about stealing sweets, and she certainly wasn't going to think of all the lies she had told in her two lives.

"Enough!" Sirius shouted. "Harry, Cormac, I would like for the two of you to come with me. Harry, you're going to talk to Deputy Headmaster Lupin about what happened, and Cormac, you'll tell me

what happened. We'll decided what to do from there," he said firmly. "As for the rest of you, you can go back to whatever you were doing before."

Harry glanced at Hermione, but nodded to Sirius and walked to Remus, who had been standing in the doorway, watching everything play out. As Sirius and Remus led the two boys to separate rooms to talk to them, the crowd began to disperse, everyone talking about the fight.

Frowning, Hermione trudged back to her chair that she had claimed earlier to do her homework. Collapsing in the chair, she picked up her fractions work, but could only stare at the numbers written on the page. The figures seemed to blur together.

Simple as the work was, she simply couldn't concentrate. *This assignment is just not meant to be finished.* Sighing in frustration, Hermione turned her thoughts to the argument between Harry and Cormac. She could easily recall the animosity between the two boys during her sixth year. Cormac was forever trying to tell everyone what to do, believing that he would be a better captain than Harry. Harry, of course, didn't take to well to someone trying to replace him. She wondered if there would ever be peace between the two of them. Given what had happened just a short time before, she didn't think so.

Forcing her thoughts back to her arithmetic, she set to work. Occasionally her thoughts would wander, but she would force herself to concentrate on her work. When she was finally finished with her work, she allowed herself to relax. It was always a relief to finish an assignment, even if it wasn't due until the end of the week. The only thing it meant was that she would have more free time.

"Hermione," Ron whined as he shuffled into the room. "I need your help. I forgot how to this! Can you help me? The problems are really hard."

Just like old times, Hermione thought with a small smile. "Of course, Ron. Come here, I'll help you." It didn't take the pair long to finish the assignment. Once she had shown Ron how to do one problem, it seemed to come back to him, and he was able to finish the remaining problems with ease.

"Thanks Hermione," Ron said with a grin. Hermione felt her heart warm. It was nice to be friends with Ron again, and it was nice to be thanked for her efforts. "Do you want to play a game?" He asked.

"Let's see if we can find Harry first," she suggested. "Then we can play together." Ron nodded and the two stood up before searching for their friends. As they walked, Hermione couldn't help but marvel at the changes in her friend once more. After so many years of Ron asking for her help and never really thanking her, it was amazing to her that he would do so now, at the age of seven. *I guess friends can have a grand impact on what kind of a person a child grows up to be.*

Of course, Hermione would not take full credit for Ron's maturity. There were very strict rules about behaviour at the school, and manners were heavily enforced. *I suppose having to say please and thank you to house - elves makes it easier to thank everyone,* she thought.

They found Harry just as he was walking out of Remus' office. "How did it go?" Ron asked. "Did you get into trouble?"

"No," Harry replied with relief. "I didn't. But neither did Cormac. Uncle Remus told me that he was just upset because he lost, but that he didn't really hurt anyone. I told him about everything Cormac said, and he said he'd talk to Papa Sirius about it and they'd work out what to do with him."

Ron shook his head. "If he always gets away with that sort of thing, no wonder his head is as big as Percy's. Hey, Harry, do you want me to talk to Fred and George? They love pulling pranks on people. I'm sure they'd get him good! Maybe they'd put makeup on him, and make him look like a girl!"

"No, Ron," Hermione interrupted firmly. "No pranks. The last thing we need to do right now is make Cormac even more angry with us. He's older than we are, so he can cause more trouble."

"I suppose," Ron said. "Still nice to think about though," he said wistfully. "Alright, come on then. Let's do something fun. If we can't prank Cormac, can we prank the girls? Not you of course, Hermione," Ron added quickly. "You don't act like a girl, so you're different."

Harry covered a grin with his hand while Hermione rolled her eyes. *So much for him being more mature*, she thought. "I said no pranks, Ron. Let's go play exploding snap," Hermione offered.

"I have a set of cards in my room," Harry offered. "I'll go get them, okay?"

"I'll come with you," Ron said, bouncing a little. It was no secret among the trio that Ron loved spending time in Harry's jungle-themed room.

"And I'll go and clear a space for us at the table in the game room," Hermione added. The three nodded to each other and separated, Harry and Ron to Harry's room, and Hermione to the game room.

Hermione's destination, the game room, was the latest addition to the school. Previously it had been a storage room, but Sirius and Remus had recently filled it with a wide variety of games and toys for the children to use. There were a few chessboards, but players usually had to bring their own chessmen, or see Tonks to borrow a set. An area was set up for gobstones, where Harry had beaten Cormac earlier. On the far side of the room there were tables set up for card games. On the shelves there were other games, muggle board games and wizarding games alike. Bouncing balls and trucks and toy brooms were in a large, bottomless chest next to the shelves. The room was full of things to keep children busy, and was usually very noisy.

After Cormac's loss to Harry at gobstones, however, the room had emptied considerably, and that was why Hermione was able to hear the lowered voices speaking to each other.

"He thinks he's so important, just because of who he is," Hermione heard Cormac saying. "And the headmaster is his godfather, so of course he sided with him."

"I know," another voice said. "Hermione Granger killed my father, and I was sent to live with people below my status." Hermione felt her heart skip a beat. That was Draco Malfoy. She couldn't suppress the shudder that came over her. "Now I have to go to school that filth."

"We need to make them see that we're not going to be pushed around just because they're famous," Cormac said. "We should do something to make them see."

"I've tried," Draco replied darkly. "But everyone pampers them." Hermione clenched her jaw in anger. "We should think about it some, then we can, I don't know, pull a prank on them, one they'll never forget."

"Good idea. A prank, one that'll make them understand they can't push us around," Cormac agreed.

"We should go, before someone sees us or hears us," Draco said.

Hermione stepped back into a small nook as the two boys slipped out of the room and walked away. Frowning, Hermione walked into the game room they had just vacated and absently cleared off one of the tables in the empty room.

This isn't good, she thought as she put away a box of blocks. A prank? What kind? What could those two be up to? Hermione felt her panic rise. She had underestimated Draco Malfoy too many times before, especially in her sixth year. *I'll have to talk with Harry and Ron,* she decided.

At that moment, the two boys walked in, Harry with a pack of cards. They were laughing over something. *Later, she thought. I'll tell them later, after dinner.* For now, she just wanted to play a game of exploding snap with her friends.

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A/N: (Cringes) I am so sorry! In case any of you haven't checked my profile in a while, my computer crashed some time ago, and literally took everything with it. I had to wait for it to be repaired, get internet access again, rewrite my chapter outline for the entire story (what I could remember of it at least) and then begin work on this chapter. I'm sorry, but I have to go again. I have three huge papers and two mini-papers that I have to write for my college classes, so it may be some time before I can write again. They're keeping me terribly busy this quarter.

Cheers,

Madm05

Chapter Twenty Six: Accidents

"I can't believe all of the homework we got!" Ron moaned two weeks later. "We're too young to have ten whole math problems every single night. And they're really hard, too. And then we have to read like five whole pages sometimes— five! Can you believe that? And my Spanish class, get this, we have to learn about roots! What do I care about plants? And what do plants and roots have to do with Spanish, eh?" Ron shook his head. "This sort of thing just isn't fair."

Hermione sighed. *Some things just don't change.* She considered telling Ron that he had done his work without any problem before, and that if he really wanted to complain he could try doing *her* work for a change, but decided to keep her mouth closed. She wouldn't even try to explain that roots were parts of words, and in the context of language, had nothing to do with plants. *There's not even that many problems,* she thought in amusement. Instead she took her seat in the far corner of one of the unused sitting rooms.

"I don't mind," Harry said as he took his usual seat beside Hermione. "If we have a lot of work, that just means that Draco and Cormac can't cause any trouble for us. It's a good thing."

"I can't believe they let Draco stay here, after all he's done to you," Ron grouched. "I mean, really now, after everything he did on Harry's birthday? And they let him stay. And his punishment! All he has to do is do lots of chores that aren't very hard, and he can't have dessert after dinner."

"There isn't a lot that can be done," Hermione said, looking at the questions she had to answer for her own— much longer— reading assignment. "He's our age. He can't very well be sent to Azkaban, but taking away his toys won't do him much good. If anything, it will make him worse, because then he'll be upset." Giving up on her own task, she picked up the arithmetic assignment the boys had been working on. They had both finished five problems, so she decided to check over their work.

"The least they could do is expel him," Harry said firmly.

“And what would they do with him then?” Hermione asked. “Keep him at the Burrow, isolated from kids his own age who could be good for him? Make him even more upset? It would be a catastrophe!”

“What’s a cactus-trophy?” Ron asked, puzzled. Harry laughed good naturedly and Hermione rolled her eyes.

“A *catastrophe* is a disaster. It’s when something really bad happens,” Hermione replied.

“Ah,” Ron murmured. “So Ginny being born was a *catas-trophy*.” Harry snorted mirthfully as Ron nodded sagely. “Yes, that’s the only way to describe it.” Hermione decided not to say anything, but didn’t bother trying to hide her smile. It was common knowledge to everyone at the school that Ginny was rather forceful.

Perhaps Riddle put an end to that in the first timeline, Hermione thought absently as she checked the boys’ homework for them once again. *That might be it, well, that and the fact that she fancied Harry. She was so quiet when she first came to Hogwarts, and even after that, she remained distant. It wasn’t until my fourth year that she started to act more herself, when she went to the Yule Ball with Neville.*

Hermione fixed one of the problems on Harry’s paper, carefully showing the proper steps he should have taken. *I think I heard Ron say once that Ginny was very talkative. It makes sense that she would be like that now, long before Riddle.* She fixed three problems on Ron’s parchment, carefully writing out how to properly do the problem, just as she had for Harry. *At least I know she’ll never have to be possessed by him, since I have the journal. All I have to do is keep it away from her, and since she never goes into my rooms, that’s not a problem.* The boys were still chattering on about Malfoy.

Hermione handed them back, satisfied. “Harry, yours looks pretty good so far, but Ron, I don’t think you’re trying very hard. I know you can do this work properly, I’ve seen you do it. Now, I showed you your mistakes— make sure you don’t repeat them. The sooner you finish your work, the better.”

Ron sighed. "You always take the fun out of not doing work by making us do it. Hey! I thought I did that one right! What did I do wrong?"

"You forgot to carry the one," Hermione replied after a quick glance. "And there is no fun in not doing work, because then it means that you'll just have to do it later, when there are other things you want to do."

"Then why aren't you doing your work then?" He demanded.

"Because I've already done it," was her calm reply. "I finished it about an hour ago, and I've been using my free time to read and do some of the work that will be due next week" she gave him a look. Ron looked appalled that she was so far ahead. "And I've been using my time to look over your work."

Ron's ears turned red as he sighed dramatically. "I guess I can finish it. I'm almost done anyways."

"Hermione, I need help with this one. I just can't get it. I've tried it three times already, and I've got three different answers." Harry looked up. "Can you help me please?"

Hermione smiled and knelt beside him to show him how to do the problem. It always made her feel warm inside when Harry said 'please' and 'thank you'. It was something that he had never really done in the other timeline, not on a regular basis at least. Helping her boys was just something she had always done— no thanks had been necessary. But it was not unwelcome.

The time passed quickly. Ron complained about his work, but never stopped working. Harry worked diligently, occasionally asking for help. Hermione would check over her boys' shoulders as they worked, helping them when necessary. Each time they would thank her, Ron with a sigh of relief and Harry with a heart - warming smile. She marvelled again at how mature they were becoming. Oh, they were still young boys, and behaved that way, but both were becoming *polite* young boys.

Harry had always been painstakingly polite, but now he seemed more natural in his courtesy, as out of genuine gratitude, and not out of fear that he would be punished. As for Ron, well, Hermione felt that, with seven children, Molly Weasley may not have been as forceful about being courteous as Hermione's own mother had. At the school, Ron had to use his manners, and it was becoming a habit for him as well as for Harry.

Once the two boys finished their work, they started playing a game of exploding snap, deciding to play there in the sitting room rather than in the game room. Hermione, meanwhile, gathered her supplies as she prepared to go to her room for bed. She was always the first among her friends to go to bed, the last to fall asleep, and always the first to awaken in the early light of dawn. Ron paid little attention, only mumbling a quick "G'night" as she left. Harry, though he remained silent, smiled warmly and nodded to her when she stood to leave.

Putting her books away and changing into her night clothes, she slipped under her blankets and pondered what was to come. Her thoughts drifted to Draco and Cormac. What prank would they pull? Would it be malicious? Would Draco try and hurt her, as he had on Harry's birthday? She didn't think so. Well, she hoped not.

Though there was no real way to keep Draco out of the school, the staff had gone to great lengths to keep him away from her, even putting them in separate classes. Of course, the teachers had claimed that they were dividing up all of the students into smaller groups so that they could give them all more individual attention. Hermione, along with Harry, Ron and the rest of the Weasleys, knew that they were divided up to keep Draco away from her and Harry. As it was, she only saw him during meals and free time.

She was also sure that part of the reason for the division was because of her disorder and jumpiness. So far she had shattered the kitchen window four times because one of the adults or Harmony came up from behind and shocked her. Being around people made her feel jittery, and things tended to explode when she was jittery.

Her thoughts continued to drift. The Ministry was once again being revolutionized, and she was once again in the dark. As an eight year

old, she wasn't privy to the goings on in the Ministry, and Sirius and Remus thought her too young, and kept the *Daily Prophet* from her in addition to telling her nothing. From what she could piece together from the snippets she had managed to overhear, Crouch was going to be removed from office. Much to her dismay, McNair was in the running to be the next Minister of Magic. Apparently, he had not been connected to the illegal investigation of the school.

Hermione rolled over onto her side. Luna had been looking rather glum the last few days, and the teachers were being very gentle with her. Hermione wondered if perhaps Mr. Lovegood had gone off on another expedition and left Luna behind—Hermione knew that Luna loved to go on expeditions and look for all sorts of nonexistent creatures with her father. Perhaps that was why she was so sad? Hermione resolved to talk to her about it later, when she had the time.

She rolled onto her stomach and glanced at the clock. It was a quarter to midnight. Her thoughts turned to the new additions to the school. Cormac had already attached himself to Draco. Would Crabbe and Goyle cause trouble, now that they were following Draco again? And Pansy, she seemed so different in Ginny's company than what Hermione remembered from Hogwarts. She wondered what would become of them. Would they become the same people they had become in the first timeline, or would they change, as Harry, Ron and even Neville had changed? *Only time will tell*, she thought wryly.

It was nearly two in the morning before she finally drifted off to sleep.

Hermione woke early the following morning, as was her custom. She shook away the remnants of her dream—the Dark Harry had thrown a dinner party for his associates—and went about her daily rituals. After bathing and dressing for the day, she checked over her homework, more out of habit than necessity. She was blissfully unaware of all of the giggling going on around her.

Hermione arrived at breakfast and took her seat next to Harry, while Ron sat on his other side. More giggling. Hermione paid them no mind—it was normal for the girls to giggle. Harry gave her an odd look, but shrugged and began eating—he always waited for her to

arrive before tucking in. Ron had already been eating, and didn't notice anything different about the girls around him.

Just as Harry and Hermione finished, Sirius and Remus entered the room, looking solemn. "Harry, Hermione, can we speak with you?"

The others began to giggle and whisper amongst themselves. Ron looked up from his food and gave his friends a questioning look. Harry and Hermione shared a glance before shrugging simultaneously. Neither knew what was going on. Hermione raised her hand in a calming gesture to tell Ron that they would fill him in on what was going on later.

Sirius and Remus lead them out of the room and into Sirius' office. The two were seated as the two older men stepped behind the desk. Remus cleared his throat. "Something rather... interesting has come to our attention," he began. Harry and Hermione exchanged puzzled looks.

"It would seem that, sometime last night, someone wrote a rather interesting message across the walls of the art room," Sirius continued, still watching them carefully. Hermione looked at Harry just as he looked at her. Neither knew what the two men were talking about.

"What was this message, Uncle Sirius?" Hermione asked calmly. What could be written on the walls that would merit being taken to Sirius' office?

"Harry and Hermione, Forever and Always," Remus replied softly. "There was a large heart around the words."

"It was in your handwriting, Hermione," Sirius added.

Hermione started. Her handwriting? How? "I didn't do it! I mean, I was in bed rather early last night, Harry even saw me go to bed." At this, Harry nodded vigorously. "It wasn't me, I would never something so—"

“Calm down, Hermione, we know it wasn’t you. You would never do anything like that,” Remus soothed. “We just wanted to let you know and ask if you know anything about how it happened, or why.”

Hermione glanced at Harry. They knew exactly how it happened, and why. It was Draco and Cormac, and they did it because they were trying to get back at her and Harry. She wasn’t sure if their goal was getting the two of them in trouble, or embarrassing them. It was just a relief to know that they weren’t going to try and set her bed on fire while she was in it. *Not that it would have worked, with all of the charms already on everything in my room.*

“It might have been Draco,” Harry offered innocently. “He’s always trying to get Hermione in trouble for something, or hurt her. It might have been him.”

The two older men looked at them shrewdly for a long moment. “We’ll look into it, you two,” Sirius said. “Until then, we want you two to stick together, and be careful. We don’t know for sure who did this, and we don’t know why. It could just be a harmless prank, but we want you to be careful nonetheless.”

“I think that should cover it,” Remus mused. “Why don’t you both get to your first class. You have an art lesson to attend.” Hermione visibly cringed at the mention of her art class. “I believe Mr. Valentino said you’ll be doing water paintings today. Run along now.”

Harry and Hermione stood and left the room. “So,” Harry began, shutting the door behind him. “Why do you think they did it? I mean, it could have been to try and make us look silly in front of everyone, or it could have been to get us into trouble.”

“Or both,” Hermione muttered. “I was thinking the same thing myself. Either one is possible.” She looked up at the ceiling as they walked. “Personally, I’d like to know how they were able to copy my handwriting. We’ll just have to wait, I guess.” Harry nodded, but remained silent.

It wasn’t long before they reached the art room. When they stepped inside, the girls began giggling, and the boys began sniggering. “Harry and Hermione, sitting in a tree—”

“Attention!” Mr. Valentino cut off the unknown— though Hermione suspected it was Susan Bones— singer. The teacher gave Harry and Hermione a dark look. They assumed it was because of the message that had been written on the walls of his classroom earlier. A quick glance revealed that, thankfully, one of the staff members had vanished it.

“Today, we will begin studying water paintings. First, some history, then basic application.” Hermione perked up at the idea of a lecture. Lectures she could handle. It was the painting part that would come later that she was dreading. “Of course, you will not be graded on anything from the lecture because you are all too young, it is all extra.” Hermione’s shoulders drooped. Her grade was doomed.

“Hey,” Ron whispered as Mr. Valentino began to talk about the origins of water painting. “What did your dads want earlier?”

Harry quickly informed Ron of the situation while Hermione half - listened to her boys, half - listened to the lecture. All too soon the paints were brought out. Their task for the day was to try and paint a pretty picture. Hermione opted to try and paint a picture of the sea, blending in with the sky. *It would be fairly simple to just put different shades of blue on a piece of paper. Maybe I’ll even leave a few white places, and say it’s clouds.* She knew that she should be trying harder to excel, but she was hopeless at any sort of drawing or painting.

Art class quickly became even more dreadful. The girls continued giggling, and boys continued sniggering. Harry was very red in the face, and continued on his work of a stag, a dog, and a werewolf, though really they looked like brown, black and grey blurs with legs. Harry’s artistic abilities were very similar to her own, though he actually did try. Hermione’s patience was quickly wearing thin as she tried to focus on her attempt at an ocean, though really it was turning out to look more like some sort of abstract work. Ron was oblivious, and working very hard on a surprisingly well done picture of his house.

Art class could not end quickly enough for Hermione, but the rest of the day was no better. All of the other students there teased them mercilessly. Hermione had forgotten how immature kids were, but

she was now very aware of how grown - up each and every one of her peers were.

But the time classes for the day had ended, Hermione was at her wits end. She was tired of all of the jokes, of the giggling, of the sniggering, and of the never ending questions. Hermione didn't know if Draco and Cormac had been trying to embarrass them or get them into trouble, but whatever their intent, their prank had worked. Hermione was well on her way to insanity. If she had to hear one more person making kissing noises, she was going to scream. Maybe she would even shatter all of the windows in the school for good measure.

Harry and Hermione both went to bed early that night, ready to have a little peace. Hermione tossed and turned, trying to sleep. Late into the night, Hermione fell into a restless sleep, filled with visions of the Dark Harry.

Draco's revenge had meant little to Hermione. It had nearly driven her insane— no simple feat, considering all she had endured— but that was all. No real damage had been done, after all. She supposed, later, that the apparent success of his prank had lulled her into a false sense of security.

It had happened three days after the original prank. The commotion had died down, as had the teasing. She and Harry were left in peace, for the most part, and life continued on as usual.

They were released from the eternal torture that was art class and were enjoying their free time. The three planned to go outside since the weather was pleasant. While they walked, Harry and Ron were talking about wandless magic.

"Merlin I'd sure like to be able to do magic without a wand. Can you imagine all the things you could do? I mean, Hermione can do all sorts of neat things!" Ron had a glazed look in his eyes as talked.

Harry shrugged. "It's fun. I mean, it's kind of hard, but there are some things that are a lot of fun to do."

Ron perked up, noticing Harry's slip. "You mean you can do magic without a wand too?" He looked a little crestfallen. "Oh. Of course. Why don't, why don't you two go ahead and go outside. I... uh... I have some work to do. I think I'll go to my... uh... to my room. See you guys later." Ron quickly turned and walked away.

"I'm sorry Hermione," Harry said mournfully, realizing his mistake. "I just, it was Ron, and I'm used to telling him stuff."

Hermione nodded in understanding when an idea struck her. "Why don't we teach him?" Hermione offered. "I think it would be great if the three of us could do wandless magic, don't you? And he wouldn't feel left out, and I bet he's feeling *very* left out right now."

Harry nodded vigorously. "You're right, Hermione, we should go find him right now and tell him." He stood and set off to find Ron, Hermione following.

Hermione herself felt as if what they were doing was *right*. Harry, Hermione, and Ron. The three of them. A trio. They had fought together in the first timeline, and she would be damned if they would not do the same in this timeline. And if the three of them could do wandless magic? So much the better. It was easier to learn things when one was young, so hopefully Ron would catch on to wandless magic more easily than he normally would have.

They found Ron walking aimlessly down an empty hallway. He turned and looked at them when Harry grabbed his arm. "Oh. Hi."

"Ron," Harry began. "Want to do it with us?"

"What?" Ron asked, his confusion plain.

"What Harry means, Ron, is that we would like to teach you how to do wandless magic, just like us," Hermione clarified.

"You mean, you mean I can learn how to do magic like you two do? Really?" Ron asked hopefully. "Are you sure? I mean, I'm just me. I'm sure Harry can do it, him being the Boy - Who - Lived and all. Are you sure about me? Percy could do it, he's smart, and so are Fred and George, but are you sure I can do it?"

Hermione was privately amazed at how deep his insecurities ran, even when he was this young. It didn't endear Molly Weasley's skills as a mother to her. In fact, it made her rather indignant on behalf of the closest thing to a brother she had ever had. "Ron," she set her hand firmly on his shoulder in a comforting gesture. "I know you can. I'm Hermione Granger - Lupin. I know these sort of things."

"Trust me," Harry piped up. "You should listen to her. She's never wrong."

Smiling abashedly, Hermione didn't have the heart to tell her dearest friend that she had been wrong *many* times. Alas, Harry spoke so fervently that she didn't want to shatter his beliefs. Besides, it was pleasant to be complimented, especially by Harry.

Ron beamed at them. "I'd love to learn wandless magic!"

"It's a secret," Harry said. "You can't tell anyone, not even your Mum and Dad. Once you're good enough, you can show Papa Sirius and Uncle Remus. That way you can have lessons with me and Hermione."

"You mean you get to have real lessons?" He asked, wide-eyed.

Harry shrugged. "Sort of. None of the adults can really do it. Really we just practice while they watch, so if something bad happens, they can help us. Hermione is the one who taught me how to do magic. We've never told the adults how to do it."

"Wow," Ron said in awe.

"Alright you two," Hermione interrupted. "You need to talk about something else, or someone will hear." Harry and Ron immediately started talking about Quidditch to her dismay, but she couldn't help but smile as they debated whether it was better to be a seeker (as Harry believed) or a keeper (as Ron believed). Hermione refused to give her opinion on the matter. She even refused to look at either of them, lest she give away her preference, focusing on the ceiling instead.

The three never got around to going outside. They had spent so much time discussing wandless magic and later Quidditch, that they forgot their original plans. It wasn't until Hermione glanced at a clock that Hermione realized the time. She, Harry and Ron were running late on their way down to their next class— Reading, with Remus. In a panic, she rushed the boys down the hall towards the staircase that would lead them to his classroom.

None of them had seen the thin cord tied in front of the stairwell they were about to run down. Suddenly she was falling, and then she wasn't. Her nose was a mere inch from the step, and her hair had fallen around her face, brushing against the stairs. She knew instinctively that Harry had saved her. Her necklace kept her from sensing magic, but she always *knew* when Harry was using his.

"Hermione!" Harry called, reaching for her and pulling her up just as Remus came bolting up the stairwell.

"Hermione! Harry! Ron! What happened?" The older man demanded.

"Blimey, there's a rope or something here," Ron said, grabbing the cord. He looked up. "Hermione fell over it. It about killed her, it did!"

"Are you alright?" Harry asked softly. His voice was gentle, but Hermione sensed the underlying panic.

"I'm fine," she assured him. "Really. Just a bit of a scare is all."

Harry gave her a dubious look, as though he didn't believe her. Instead he turned away. "Uncle Remus," he said solemnly. "I think Draco Malfoy did it. I think he was trying to hurt Hermione."

"Now Harry," Remus began. "You can't go—"

"He did it," Harry said firmly. "We heard him saying he wanted to get back at Hermione after I got into that fight with Cormac about the gobstones. They said they were going to pull a prank."

Remus reached over and pulled Hermione into his arms. Shaken as she was, she accepted the comfort. "And what happened a few days

ago? The writing on the wall? You said that you thought Draco might have done it. Is that why?" He looked at Hermione.

"Yes, Papa Remus. We didn't say anything because, well, it was a prank, just a prank. We thought it didn't mean anything."

"We didn't know he was going to try and kill Hermione," Ron added, scowling.

Remus made a noncommittal noise. "Well, I think Hermione could use a break for the day." His voice was strangely distant. "Why don't you go to your room, Owlet? Take a nap, maybe, or read some of your books." He smiled, but it was strained, forced. "I'll take you there myself, so you can get some rest. You gave us quite a scare when you shattered all of those windows." Hermione looked around for the first time since her fall, and found that every window around her was broken.

"As for you," he was addressing the boys. "Why don't you go ahead and head to class? I'll speak to Sirius about what you've told me. He may want to talk to you both later, to hear what you have to say. Until then, you'd better run along. I'll be there shortly— Dora is there now."

Harry and Ron took off down the stairs again, their heads together. Hermione felt a sense of unease come over her. Her boys were plotting something, she could feel it, and as Papa Remus was currently carrying her to her bedroom, there was no way for her to monitor them.

Not long after, Hermione found herself sitting on her bed, watching the animals on her walls. Remus had left her with a small kiss on the head and the promise that he would take care of everything. Hermione shook her head. He was a brave man, trusting her to simply stay in her room, and foolish to let the boys go off on their own. If she thought she could get away with it, she would sneak out and speak with Harry and Ron herself.

As it was, she was stuck in her room. It didn't matter that she wanted to leave, go class, pretend nothing had happened. She'd rather not think of Malfoy at all. Hermione lay back on her bed. She hadn't slept

well in a long time, so she figured she might as well rest her eyes. It wasn't long before she fell into a restless sleep.

The Dark Harry was standing in a room she had seen many times before. It was a frightening place— his trophy room. Voldemort, Bellatrix, Wormtail, Snape and McNair were positioned in each of the corners of the room, with McNair in the centre. Voldemort was a lump of robes and bone, and lay prone on a small pedestal. Bellatrix was forever frozen in a kneeling position, her expression horrified. Wormtail was also kneeling, his face pleading. Snape's flayed body was strung up like a marionette. In the centre of the room, suspended in midair was McNair, her killer, hanging from a cross. Hermione shivered. He'd been crucified.

"Will you put them here?" A voice asked. Hermione turned and saw Neville standing in the doorway. He looked much as he had the last time she had seen him. "Are they to be trophies as well?"

"I have not decided," the Dark Harry replied. "They have certainly caused more than their fair share of troubles for me, but they can hardly be considered trophies. In this room I have the greatest traitors, and Darkest witches and wizards of all time. Draco and Ginny are mere annoyances in comparison."

Neville nodded. "Does Hermione know anything?"

"No," Harry replied, shaking his head. "I have a tight hold on what the *Prophet* prints nowadays, and Hermione spends all of her time in the library doing research, and preparing the baby's room."

"Did she finally decide on a theme for the room, or is she still debating?"

"She decided on a fish theme," Harry said with a sardonic smile. "She wants the fish to swim around on the walls, and have coral and all sorts of things. She said she dreamed it." His smile faded a little as he spoke.

“Sounds good. Well,” Neville looked at his watch. “Ginny and Draco should be here within the hour. Think we can have them dealt with in time for you to slip back into bed before Hermione wakes? She’ll be worried if she wakes and you’re not there.”

Harry nodded. “It shouldn’t be a problem. Fair warning—Hermione plans to ask you to be the Godfather sometime soon.”

Neville bowed his head. “I’m honoured, of course.”

“Ron would have been the Godfather before, but now...”

Neville looked up, a knowing look in his eye. “It’s alright. Accidents happen.”

The Dark Harry smiled. “Indeed they do.”

Hermione sat up in her bed, her chest heaving. A shiver ran down her spine. *Accidents* indeed. She shuddered and lay back in her bed. A quick glance at the clock revealed that it wasn’t even time for the last class of the day. She rubbed her head, feeling the beginnings of a headache. She hated sleeping.

A sudden commotion outside her door drew her attention. Frowning, Hermione slipped out of her bed, smoothed the wrinkles from her clothes, and peeked out of her room. Tonks’ mother, Andromeda, was cradling Draco Malfoy in her arms near the foot of the stairs, calling for help. Other teachers came eventually, and Draco was taken away on a conjured stretcher, likely to be healed. Hermione understood immediately what had happened, even if the adults didn’t.

Harry.

She set off to look for him, only to be ushered into the kitchen, where other teachers were taking the other students. Harry and Ron slipped in a moment later, unaccompanied by a teacher. They immediately moved to her, their expressions grim.

"Did you get any sleep?" Harry asked softly. "You don't look so good, Hermione."

"What did you do?" She demanded softly, looking around to be sure they were not heard. "I think they had to take Draco away to be healed, and I know you two had a hand in it!"

Harry and Ron shared an uneasy look. Ron's face turned red as he toed the ground ashamedly. It was Harry who answered. "He tried to kill you," he said harshly, his eyes hard. "We made him stop. Don't worry, Hermione, no one will know it was us."

"You pushed him down the stairs!" She hissed. "I know you did!"

Harry lifted his chin defiantly. "I'm not going to let anyone hurt you," he said firmly.

"And I'm not either," Ron added. "You're alright for a girl, Hermione, and you're my friend. Harry and I don't let people say bad things about, and we're not going to let them do bad things to you either!"

Hermione frowned and looked at them. Ron looked defiant, but Harry only grimaced. "Don't let people say..." Understanding dawned. "You two have been fighting with the kids who make fun of me." Ron and Harry nodded, Ron proudly, Harry abashedly. Part of her was touched that they would defend her so vehemently, another part was horrified that they had been up to such things and she hadn't known.

"Listen to me, I appreciate that you want to protect me, I really do, but just can't—"

"Okay, can I have your attention please?" Remus called. Everyone looked to him and stopped talking. "Very good, now, I have some things to discuss with you. A little bit ago one of the students fell down the stairs. Now, we don't know why he fell, but the Headmaster and I want to tell you all that you need to be careful near the staircases. This is to be absolutely *no* roughhousing or there are not be *any pranks!*

"If I hear that anyone, and I do mean anyone, has been toying with the staircases in any way, that student will be expelled. It is very

dangerous, and we don't want anyone to get hurt. Have I made myself clear?" Remus scanned the room while heads bobbed in understanding. "Very well. Teachers, if you would please, excuse the students for their final class. There is to be a staff meeting. The Tonks' have agreed to watch the children."

The three Tonks' ushered everyone out of the room while the other teachers went to the staff room. The children began to talk amongst themselves as they left the room in small groups to fetch their school supplies before wandering off, some heading to the game room, others to one of the various family rooms or their dormitories.

Hermione silently led her boys to her bedroom, fully intending to give them the lecture of their lives. She was furious with herself. It was almost as if Harry, despite her intervention, despite being taken away from the Dursleys and being given a loving home, was still turning into his darker counterpart. A distant voice whispered that she should have expected it— Harry was Harry. It was in his nature to be protective of those he cared for. Ron was still loyal to a fault, so of course he would follow Harry.

Worse, she wouldn't be able to speak with Sirius or Remus and have them deal with it appropriately. If she told them that Harry and Ron had pushed Draco, they would see it as a betrayal, and there was no telling what they would do if they felt she betrayed them. Regardless, she was still going to give them the lecture of their lives.

After leading them into her room, she waited for Harry to shut the door. Hermione whirled around and faced them. "Do you two want to tell me what you were thinking?" She demanded.

It was Ron who answered. "We already told you. We won't let anyone make fun of you or hurt you." Harry nodded his agreement.

"Oh? So you've become nothing more than bullies?" She asked coldly. "I'd thought better of you." Both boys flinched. "Ron, your brother pick on you and Harry, Dudley bothered you every chance he got. Now you're just like them. I hope you're happy with yourselves."

"It's not like that," Harry said in frustration.

"Isn't it?" Came the icy reply.

"No, it's not. Dudley hurts people because he can."

"And so do you, apparently," Hermione snapped.

Harry flinched again, but carried on. "I'm not like Dudley, Hermione, I'm not." It pained her to hear the plea in his voice, as though he were begging her to believe him. "I just wanted to protect you." Hermione looked into his eyes, using what little Legilimency skill she possessed. She could not detect a lie in his eyes.

"Yeah," Ron added. "We just wanted to protect you. We did the same to him as he was going to do to you. Better him than you, you know?"

"Were you even thinking?" She demanded softly, her eyes watering. "You could have killed him, do you realize that? Do you know what's going to happen when he wakes up and tells everyone that you pushed him down the stairs? Do you know what will happen to you? I'll tell you what will happen, you'll—"

"We won't get caught," Harry interrupted. "He didn't see us. Besides, we made it look like an accident. If anything, he'll get in trouble for not being in class."

Hermione felt her blood run cold. "What do you mean you made it look like an accident?"

Harry shrugged. "Ron and I were down the hall, hiding around the corner. I used my magic to push him. That way it would look like he fell. No one will figure it out. I mean, accidents happen."

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A/N: Groans Man, it's been forever! I'm sorry I was gone so long, but things have been a mess lately. First I had a million papers to write, then I had to work extra because we lost people at work, so I had make up work. Mind, I didn't get promoted or even get a raise, I just got more work. My boss *still* hasn't hired more help, so there hasn't been any relief at work. Grumbles Classes started again, then wedding showers and baby showers and a wedding, then I had to

reread all of the Harry Potter books for when the last book came out...

As for Deathly Hallows, I'm of two minds. Parts were fantastic, but other parts were horrible. Harry's speech at the end, when he finally beat Riddle? Good God! I've read fan fics that did a better job. Terribly cliché. Other parts were ridiculously predictable. I knew Snape's true allegiance, I knew the mystery Horcrux was the tiara in the room of requirement (I even wrote an essay on it some time ago), I predicted most of the major deaths, the list goes on.

The back story was great though. And hey, it turns out that all of those manipulative Dumbledore stories weren't too far off. Huh. Overall, it wasn't a total bust. Some things were fun.

Back on topic, I don't know when I'll be able to update next. Things are still hectic. Summer courses just let out not too long ago (hence the update), but fall quarter will be starting up again in a week, there's a baby shower to plan, work, and whatever else life decides to throw my way. The best I can do is guarantee an update by Christmas. Sorry.

I would like to thank everyone who reviewed the last few chapters, and thank you all again for waiting so long. Thank you for reading.

Cheers,

Madm05

Chapter Twenty Seven: Luck

Just had he said, neither Harry nor Ron were caught. Draco's fall was declared an accident, so extra measures were taken to ensure nothing of the sort ever happened again, and no one guessed that it was anything more. There were no spells against clumsiness, but it was possible to prevent jinxes, should anyone steal a wand, and was spelled against any traps the others may leave.

Draco himself had become more withdrawn upon his return to school. He lost a great deal of his arrogance, but privately Hermione was sure it was not the end of it. Nearly dying may have knocked some sense into him, but she also knew the effects may well be detrimental in the future.

Hermione shivered every time she remembered Harry's words—*accidents happen*—but there was nothing she could really do. Harry was likely to see any confrontation as an act of betrayal on her part. She didn't want to consider the consequences of such actions.

The cynical voice lurking in the darkest corner of her mind reminded her that Harry was very possessive, and that he was fiercely protective of what he perceived as being 'his'. She has seen his possessiveness first hand in her sixth year—it was hard to miss the angry look in his eyes every time Ginny had kissed Dean. It was part of his character, and there was nothing she could do to change his personality.

Instead, she had focused heavily on curbing his Darker tendencies. Pranks were closely monitored, and dangerous pranks were forbidden altogether. Whenever the chance arose, Hermione would remind Harry that Dudley was a bully, and that he should strive to be different from his cousin. Still, she wasn't sure it was enough. There *had* to be more she could do to make him understand that it wasn't okay to protect her if another was going to be hurt or worse.

Hermione resolutely pushed her dark thoughts away. It wasn't the time. There were other, more important things for her to do, like laugh at Ron.

“How did the two of you talk me into this again?” Ron asked, mortified, as he stared woefully at a mirror. “I don’t look like an elf, I look like a pixie!”

Hermione and Harry shared a look then smothered their grins. “You said that you wanted to meet Santa Clause,” Hermione said. “And if you want to do that, then you have to help him.”

“And if you’re going to help him, then you have to dress like an elf,” Harry added. “This way the muggles won’t find out. Besides, it’s not really that bad. Hermione and I did it last year.”

“But do I have to wear the tights?” He moaned. “Do I?”

Harry chuckled. “Of course you do. I am going to wear them, too.”

Hermione, already dressed, watched the two boys banter back and forth. She could hardly believe it was Christmas time already. She was glad that they would be going to the orphanage again. It felt good to be doing things she had done in the first timeline. They weren’t the exact same things, of course, but helping people was simply part of who Hermione was, and being able to help *anyone* was a balm on her soul. Now, if only she could convince her ragtag family to go Christmas carolling.

“You two need to hurry it up,” she said. “Santa will be here soon, and we’ll be leaving just as soon as they make our ears pointed.” Hermione left, chuckling softly to herself. Ron made a face.

Walking away, made her way to the kitchen. As she passed the family room she saw Horace, chasing his tail—which was really more of a nub than a tail—being cheered on by Sirius and Tonks. Hermione shook her head and smiled at the scene before continuing on. As she walked, she turned her thoughts to all that had happened since Draco’s *accident*.

Ron was surprisingly good at wandless magic for a beginner. He wasn’t as good as she or Harry, but he was well on his way. Hermione was pleased with his progress, Harry was excited for his friend, and Ron was very proud of himself, as he should be.

Hermione had her own theories about that. Her guess was that Ron could tap into his magic easier than Harry, and thus learn to control his magic easier, because he could tap into his emotions easier. Harry, who had suffered much abuse at the hands of the Dursleys, repressed his emotions, and emotions powered magic.

Of course, Hermione believed that being young helped. She knew, having read several books on the subject, that it was easier to learn things at a young age because the brain was not fully matured. It was one of the reasons she liked having an eight year old body—physically, her brain was not as mature as an adult brain, despite the extra memories. To her delight, this facilitated her learning to speak other languages. It also helped Ron learn to use wandless magic.

In the few months he had been practicing, he learned to summon small objects from around the room and he could hover, a feat he had finally managed a week before. Ron couldn't suspend himself in air for very long, but he was doing rather well, all things considered. Hermione firmly recalled Ron having trouble using the summoning charm with a wand in their fourth year, so his ability to summon *anything* meant a great deal, even if it only meant something to her. His ability to hover, even if it was only for a short amount of time, was extraordinary in that it was testament to having a great deal of power. It was nothing for her unrestrained magic, but being magically bound like Harry, it meant a great deal in regard to his magical aptitude.

Their secret meetings to practice *without* the adults had made time fly, it seemed.

Now it was Christmas once again, and Hermione and her boys were preparing to meet Santa Claus. Ron had mentioned that he always wanted to meet Santa Claus and Harry, being Harry, and begged and pleaded with Sirius and Remus to let Ron join them for their ride with Santa. Sirius, unwilling to refuse Harry anything, especially since the Boggart incident, had folded under the pressure of Harry's emerald eyes looking up at him. Sirius had spoken to *Santa* and the Weasleys, and arranged for Ron to help Santa.

Hermione felt a pang of regret at Ron joining her and Harry. It was selfish of her, she knew, especially since she spent so much time

with Harry, but Christmas was a very special time for herself and Harry. She didn't want to share those precious moments with anyone but her family.

Worse, she was well aware that Ron wasn't going to help out of the goodness of his heart. Hermione knew that, even though he was matured under her watchful eye, he was still a little boy who wanted toys and attention. Ron had wanted to meet Santa to tell him what he wanted for Christmas that year. Then Harry told Ron that, if he helped give out presents, he could meet Santa. Harry, unaware of the damage he was doing, told Ron that his room had been a gift from Santa for helping.

Ron will be expecting something like that, Hermione thought dismally as she walked into the kitchen. There were several piles of presents, waiting to be loaded into Santa's sleigh. Taking a seat at the table, she couldn't help but worry about the plight of the Weasleys. Hermione wasn't a fool. Ron was expecting something nice from Santa for Christmas for helping, and the Weasleys couldn't afford anything like that. More, even if they could afford it, they couldn't very well get something nice for Ron and not for his siblings. On top of that, the Weasley Pride would not allow them to accept handouts.

Ron would be devastated, in the end, and he would blame Harry.

"What's wrong, little Owlet?" A soft voice asked. It was gentle and familiar enough that she only jumped when she heard it— nothing exploded.

Hermione looked up to see her Papa Remus standing behind her. She sighed. "Ron," she said simply. "I'm worried that he won't like what I got him for Christmas." Privately, Hermione was sure he would adore the Chudley Cannons poster she had found.

"Are you more worried about what you got him, or what Santa might give him and not give to his brothers and sister?" Remus gave her a knowing look. Hermione winced a little at how close Remus had come to the truth. "Ah, I see. Always worried about everyone else." Hermione marveled how close and yet how far away he could be from the truth. She was more concerned about Harry than anything. She wasn't about to correct him, though.

The werewolf took a seat and pulled her into his lap. Hermione took comfort in his warmth and leaned into him. It was a guilty pleasure of hers, acting like a child. She had long since stopped trying to convince herself that she was doing it to make everyone believe she was eight and that she did it because Remus was becoming more and more of a father to her everyday.

Remus sighed and kissed her forehead, pulling her out of her thoughts. "Well, my little Owlet, don't you worry about that. I'm sure Santa has a few things in mind." He looked into her eyes. "Everything will be alright. Things have a way of working themselves out."

Hermione smiled at him, though it felt a bit forced. She hoped everything would be alright and work out in the end. So far things had been difficult at best, between not being told what was happening and knowing things that no one else would have dreamt in their darkest of nightmares.

Rather than dwell on such dismal thoughts, Hermione considered the impending trip to the orphanage. There was something bothering her about it— she felt as if there was something she was supposed to remember, but it was always just out of her reach. Deciding that she was getting nowhere fast, she turned away from her thoughts just as her boys jingled and jangled their way into the kitchen.

Their costumes had changed this year. Harry was wearing a bright red suit this time, along with his red and white striped tights, though Hermione thought it made him look like a candy cane. Ron was dressed in green, since the adults decided it would be too much red if he were to wear the red suit. Hermione was dressed in a red and green suit, a fitting combination, she felt, of her boys' outfits.

Ron, however, looked mortified in his green costume. Harry, who liked dressing up— Hermione was sure it was because he never had the opportunity when he was with the Dursleys— was delighted to be in costume again. He cheerfully walked towards Hermione, a bounce in his step and the bells jingling. "Is Santa here yet?"

Hermione shook her head. "Not yet, but he should be here soon."

“What’s he like?” Ron asked, coming forward. “Is he as fat as everyone says?”

They heard a deep chuckle coming from the other side of the room. “I prefer plump,” the man said as he stepped into view. Professor Albus Dumbledore was in costume again, his long white beard tucked into the large black belt at his waist, seemingly brighter against the red of his suit. Ron stared dumbfounded and began to stutter. Professor Dumbledore chuckled again. “It’s alright, I’ve been called worse, I assure you. Now, to work.”

“Humph,” another voice came from the doorway. “Work indeed. I loaded the sleigh while *you* were off filching biscuits.” Professor McGonagall stepped into the light, dressed once again as Mrs. Claus. “Let’s move along, now, we’ve work to do.”

Hermione smiled to herself and stood from her seat, following dutifully behind her future professors. Harry and Ron, as was their habit, immediately fell in step on either side of her. The trio walked into the family room, the bells on their hats and shoes jingling and jangling.

“Wanna go!” Harmony was crying, tears streaming down her face. “Wanna go! Peez Papa Moo, peez, wanna go wiff Hewmione, an’ Hawwy!”

The werewolf was clearly torn. He bounced Harmony in his arms trying to quiet her, telling her she wasn’t big enough and that she had to stay home, looking like he was going to crack at any moment. Harmony’s pleading had nearly broken him— Remus was ready to ask the headmaster if Harmony could go with them, even though she was still young.

Sirius, however, was not so easily broken. Seeing his friend in need of help, Sirius stood and smoothly took Harmony into his own arms. “Shh, come on now, little one, it will be alright. You don’t want to go out there, it’s cold outside.”

“No! Wanna go. Unca Foot! Peez!” And just like that, Sirius was broken to her will. The ‘Unca Foot’ got him every time. He was about to grab his wand— likely to begin transfiguring a costume— when Tonks snatched Harmony out of his arms.

"Men," she mumbled, bouncing Harmony. "So stamina when it comes to little kids. They're all talk."

"Hewmione! Hawwy!" Harmony cried, reaching out for them. "Won-Won!" Hermione choked, but no one noticed. The adults were shuffling about, trying to calm Harmony down while the professors ushered Harry, Hermione and Ron out the door and into the sleigh.

Harry chuckled. "That can be your name, Ron."

"What?" The redhead asked.

"We have to have other names when we help, so that no one knows who we are. I'm Dobby, and Hermione is Winky. You can be Won-Won."

"Eugh!" Ron made a disgusted noise and turned away. "Do I have to?" He asked Professor Dumbledore.

The older man nodded in reply, his blue eyes twinkling. "Yes, I'm afraid you must choose another name, young Mister Weasley, and Won-Won is as good as any."

Ron slumped, defeated. "Fine," he said at last. "I'll... I'll be Won-Won." He suddenly scowled and turned to Harry. "And don't you tell Fred and George, Harry, or Ginny. They'll never leave me alone about it."

Hermione only smiled and shook her head good naturedly. She took the opportunity to look out at the city around them as they rushed by. It was beautiful, she realized. The snow made London look like a winter wonderland.

Time passed quickly as the group passed gawking Muggles left and right. Some must have seen them last year, for they laughed and waved. Smiling, Hermione waved back. A gentle snow began to fall. Harry and Ron laughed delightedly, both trying to catch the snowflakes on their tongues. Hermione grinned at them, enjoying the peace.

It seemed like only a few minutes later the sleigh pulled up to the orphanage once again. Again, the niggling feeling that she had felt off and on every time she thought about the orphanage returned. Hermione frowned as she gazed at the building. It looked much the same as it had before. There was something very odd about the orphanage that she couldn't quite put her finger on.

The door slammed open, and the boy Hermione recognized as Jeremy came running out, his face alight with holiday cheer. Other kids came and stood in the doorway, cheering merrily as Santa, his wife and his elves, stepped down from the sleigh. "Ah, young Jeremy! Come to offer your services again?" *Santa* asked.

"Yes sir," Jeremy said, beaming. He excitedly grabbed a stack of gifts as he had the year before, and started back towards the orphanage. "Move it guys, if you want Santa to give you your presents, you best get out of the way. Go on, move along, you'll get you stuff if you've been good this year."

Harry and Hermione shared a grin, but Ron looked confused. "He helped us out a bit last year," Harry quickly explained. "Santa knew his name without asking," he said, as if that explained everything. His answer was enough for Ron, who seemed awed by such a feat.

Hermione shook her head and grabbed her own stack of gifts to carry. She was just thankful that, in the wizarding world, the idea of a man in a red suit going down chimneys and leaving gifts for children wasn't such an outlandish idea. It was even easier to believe in said man in a red suit if you believed you helped him deliver presents.

As it was, Harry adored being Santa's little helper, and Hermione sincerely hoped that this little activity would become a tradition, even after Harry learned the truth. It was important to Hermione that Harry understand the value of giving. It was important to Sirius too, now that he had learned of Harry's possible future.

The group entered the orphanage and found the headmaster, or rather, *Santa* talking with a woman holding a toddler in her arms. She looked... familiar to Hermione. She was short with curly brown hair and light blue eyes. There was just something about the woman...

"I'm new, myself. Just started working here two months ago. Couldn't believe the stories the kids told me that Santa came to give them presents last year. Didn't expect to see you this year."

Dumbledore chuckled along with McGonagall. "Well, as you can see, here we are. Ah! And there are my elves. Everyone, I trust you all remember Dobby and Winky." Harry and Hermione stepped forward and bowed their heads in acknowledgement. "My newest addition is Won-Won." Ron stepped up, his ears burning, and nodded his head.

A sudden memory surfaced.

A young, mousy haired boy was picking on a little girl. A short woman, looking the worse for the wear, tried to make him stop. Her curly brown hair was frazzled, her face white with exhaustion from chasing kids all day long.

Hermione's eyes widened as she, Harry and Ron followed Jeremy out to get another stack of presents to bring in. *Think, Hermione. Orphanage in London, that woman... Hufflepuff's Cup!* Hermione swallowed and mentally kicked herself. Of course! How could she have forgotten something as important as the Hufflepuff cup, hidden away in the very building she was currently hauling presents into by Tom Riddle?

"Herm— er, Winky, are you alright?" Harry asked, frowning at her.

"Dobby," she said, slowly grabbing the next stack of gifts to carry. Should she tell him? He already suspected something was going on. "Do you remember what I told you a long time ago, about Voldemort's souls?" Harry nodded. Hermione hesitated, but decided this may be her only chance in a long time. "One of them is here."

Harry stopped what he was going and stared at her for a long moment. Ron, confused, looked at them funny. "Hey, you two, what are you doing? I want to go inside. It's cold out here."

"Ron," Harry said urgently. "Hermione and I need you to do us a favour."

Ron immediately stood straighter, despite the weight of the packages in his arms. "What do you need me to do, Mate? Does it involve me being inside?" Hermione didn't miss the hopeful look on his face.

Hermione stepped towards him, already knowing what Harry was planning. "We need you to be a decoy."

Ron nodded vigorously then stopped. "What's a decoy?"

Hermione sighed. "Harry and I need to you make sure that none of the grownups look for us. We have something we have to do."

Ron looked at them, obviously torn between wanting to go along and helping them with whatever they were planning. Hermione, of course, wasn't sure what they were planning. "I can do that, but you two have to tell me what's going when you can, promise?"

"Promise," Harry swore solemnly.

"Promise," Hermione nodded.

"Alright," Ron agreed, nodding. "I'll do it."

Hermione breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank you Ron, really. We'll tell you everything later." Harry only nodded to his friend and clasped his hand on the redhead's shoulder as he had often seen his Papa Sirius do to his Uncle Remus. "We'd better take off our shoes," she murmured. "The bells will give us away otherwise."

"Good idea," Harry said, nodding.

"Better hide the shoes," Ron added. "If anyone sees your shoes, they'll know something's up." Harry and Hermione gave him a surprised look. "What do you expect?" He asked with a shrug. "Fred and George are always pulling pranks. I heard them say once that it was good to take off your shoes so no one could hear you coming, and hide 'em so no one would find 'em and give you away."

"Right," Hermione said, slipping out of her shoes and setting them in a little, out-of-the-way nook where no one would notice them. Harry

did the same, taking off his hat as well. Nodding, she added her own hat to the small pile before looking back at Harry.

Hermione stepped down the hallway, Harry close behind her. *Okay, now, I believe it was the third door on the right*, she thought as she led the way. The hallway looked much as she remembered it— dark, with cobwebs lining the ceiling. Ron nearly had a heart attack the first time around. She was almost glad he wasn't here this time.

"Through here," she whispered to Harry when he came to the door. She gripped the doorknob and turned it slowly before applying the smallest bit of pressure to the door and slowly pushing it open. She held her breathe, praying it wouldn't creak. Luck was with them, as the door made only a slight noise, but nothing that could be heard by anyone attending the party. Hermione breathed a silent sigh of relief.

The two inched their way into the dark room. Harry frowned and furrowed his brow. A moment later a small ball of light appeared in his hand. Hermione nodded her approval as he held it up, lighting the room. "This way," she whispered, moving down the aisle of beds.

As they walked, Hermione observed the room. Harry wouldn't notice, not having the memories she did, but the room was tidier than it was in the first timeline. The beds were made, and the few toys were set on beds rather than scattered about on the floor. The windows were in better condition, and there was less writing on the walls.

Focusing on the matter at hand, Hermione led Harry to an old wardrobe that seemed out of place in the room. She had learned the first time around that Tom Riddle had enchanted it so no one without magic could see it. There were repelling charms aplenty on the wardrobe, so many that Hermione wanted nothing more than to walk away. She felt almost as if she was being physically pushed away.

Harry, meanwhile, had merely glanced at the old armoire and continued walking. Hermione wasn't surprised. In the first timeline, the trio had wandered around the room for close to an hour before they cottoned on to the idea of repelling charms. It was only because she already knew where the Horcrux was that she wasn't wandering as aimlessly as Harry.

While her academic mind wanted nothing more than to explore and note similarities and differences between the two timelines, she knew she simply didn't have the time. "Harry!" She called in a hushed voice. "I need you over here."

"But there's nothing there, Hermione, just some big cabinet thing," he protested. "We should look around more. It's got to be here somewhere."

"Fine then, but I need you to do something for me first," Hermione said.

"Alright, what do you need me to do?" He asked as he approached.

"Harry, do you know how to talk to snakes when there aren't any near you?"

Harry frowned. "I don't know," he replied. "I've never tried it before. Why?"

"I want you to look at the wardrobe and try to say 'open' like a snake. Can you do that?"

"I'll try," he said, nodding. He looked at the armoire. "Open," he said, then looked at Hermione, who shook her head. "Open," he said again, and again, Hermione shook her head.

"Why don't you pretend that your snake friend, what was her name?"

"Misstessah," Harry replied.

"Misstessah, yes. Why don't you pretend Misstessah is inside there, and you need to talk to her."

Harry cocked his head to the side as he considered the idea before nodding sharply. He turned and squinted at the wardrobe, and began to hiss. Hermione smiled briefly, before turning back to the task at hand. After Harry's hissed command, the doors flung open, a malevolent red-orange glow emanating from within and, distantly, a pedestal suspended in mid-air, bearing the Hufflepuff cup. The two stepped back as a wave of heat washed over them. Hermione

swallowed thickly, clearly remembering what had happened last time around.

“Harry,” she began. “I have to tell you about this.” She gestured to the open doors. “Do you see that orange glow?” Harry nodded, wiping sweat from his brow. “That’s, well, it’s *lava*, Harry. That’s what happens when rock gets so hot that it melts. We’re going to have to fly to get the cup.”

Harry grinned wryly. “And since we don’t have a broom, it’s a good thing we *can* fly, isn’t it?”

Hermione grinned in reply, but the grin quickly faded. “There’s more to it. There is a time limit, I guess you could say. We only have so long to get in there and get the cup and get out. If we take too long,” she paused and bit her lip. “The doors will shut, and we’ll be trapped in there.”

He was silent for a long moment, but Hermione could see he was working through everything in his mind. “How long do we have, and how long does it take?”

Hermione suppressed a shudder. The first time they had gone after the cup, it had been a very close call. They hadn’t known that there was only a certain amount of time. If it hadn’t been for Harry’s superior Firebolt, they would have died. As it was, it had been a close call, with the doors slamming shut on the twigs of the tail end of his broom.

“I’m not sure,” she answered honestly. “But not very long. I think you can take as much time as you need to get there and *get* the cup, but once you touch it, I think you only have a minute, if that. It’s not very long.”

Harry nodded and stared at the floor. Suddenly he cocked his head to the side. “Did you hear that?”

“Hear what?” Hermione asked. She frowned and stepped towards the door, listening carefully. She shook her head. “I don’t hear anything. Are you sure you heard something?” There was no response. “Harry?”

She turned back to find Harry was no longer standing before the wardrobe.

She dashed to the open doors and looked through. Just as she suspected, she could clearly see Harry flying towards the pedestal bearing the cup.

She growled deep in her throat, a trait she had picked up from Remus. "Harry, if you survive, I'll kill you myself. To Hell with Voldemort, fear *me!*" She began to wring her hands and shift from one foot to the other, her eyes flickering between Harry and the doors, all the while contemplating whether she should strangle Harry with her bare hands, or use a rope. Regardless, she planned on giving him another lecture later, when they were safely at Grimmauld Place.

His distant figure began to grow, and Hermione knew he was returning. She could feel her heart beating in her chest as she waited for his return, must as she could feel her body trembling and the sweat run down her face. She bit her lip hard enough to draw blood. *Oh Harry, hurry, please hurry. You're running out of time!*

Several things began to happen at once. Harry was zooming back, a gleam of gold in his hand. The doors began to shut. Hermione began to shake harder from the stress, fear and heat. Dreading the worst, she jumped between the doors, struggling to keep them apart, to give Harry more time. He couldn't fly half as fast as he Firebolt, even with said broom was carrying three people.

As she struggled to keep the doors open, Harry was flying closer and closer until he barrelled into her, knocking them both to floor while the door slammed shut. Harry rolled off of Hermione and lay beside her on the hardwood floor, trembling just as much as Hermione.

"I should kill you for that," Hermione said weakly. It didn't come out nearly as harshly as she'd intended. It sounded rather pathetic to her ears, in fact.

"Couldn't let you get hurt," Harry argued back. He propped himself up on his elbow. "I'll never let anyone hurt you, Hermione." With that, he lay back down, panting heavily. They stayed that way, laying silently,

for several long moments. "That was harder than I thought," Harry said at last.

She couldn't stop the giggle that bubbled to the surface. It was such a ridiculous comment to make, and it was so thoroughly *Harry* that it comforted her. They were silent for a beat. "We'd better get back," she said, forcing herself to sit up. "We'll be missed."

Harry sat up, groaning a little. "What will we do with *this*?" He asked, holding up the cup.

"For now, we take with us and hide it. We'll grab it before we leave. Santa will notice if we're carrying a cup around."

Harry stood and offered her his hand. "We should put it where our hats and shoes are. It's a good spot."

Nodding, Hermione replied. "Good idea, Harry."

Hand in hand, the two left the room with a sigh of relief and stealthily made their way down the hallway. They found the nook and set the cup in the shadows and pulled on their shoes and hats before returning to the party. They caught Ron's eyes—he was in the middle of a group of kids, handing out biscuits—and nodded.

"Ah, there you are," a voice said.

"Did you need something, Santa?" Harry asked, looking up at the wizened wizard. Dumbledore smiled fondly at him.

"Indeed, Dobby. Won-Won could use some help handing out treats before we go. Why don't you and Winky help him?"

Harry nodded vigorously, a grinning lighting his face. He loved helping people. "Yes Sir!" He said cheerily, before leaving to help Ron, Hermione a step behind him. Neither saw the long, penetrating look the professor gave them.

A scant ten minutes later they were preparing to leave. Hermione shared a look with Harry and Ron, and slipped away and grabbed the cup. Not knowing what to do with it, she set it atop her head and

pulled her hat on over top of it. She stepped out of the shadows just as everyone was walking out of the door. Holding her hat— and the cup— in place, she jogged after them.

Stepping into the sleigh, she slipped the cup out from under her hat and set it on the floor, holding it securely with her feet. Everyone merrily waved goodbye as the sleigh took off down the road. This time, however, no one fell asleep. There was much to be discussed between the trio.

Hermione knew that Ron would stand by them. Harry, and herself to a lesser extent, were the reason for his confidence in himself, and he was unwaveringly loyal to them. That was not the problem, however. Much as she loved him— he was very much like the brother she'd never had— she knew he was very much like Hagrid and tended to let things slip. She couldn't blame him. He was young and hadn't learned the value of secrets. As much as she hated it, she would have to use his siblings to manipulate him into not telling anyone.

Sneaking the cup into her hat and holding on her lap, Hermione relaxed a little. A few snow flakes fluttered down on the silent path to home. She looked at her boys, and felt a rush of warmth and pride. They sat beside her, their backs straight and their heads held high. It was an unusual pose for those so young, but it was fitting, considering the conversation they would be having soon. Hermione looked back up at the sky.

Everything was going to be alright.

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A/N: Groans I'm so sorry. I was doing really good with this, honest, but then there was a ton of family drama. First my sister had her baby, but the baby had jaundice, and the doctors wouldn't let them leave. When they finally got to go home, there was something wrong with their well, so they didn't have water, thus they had to move in with me for the time being. Things have only just gotten straightened out. Anyways, I finally got this finished, so here it is. School is starting again next week, so again, I'm not sure when I'll be able to update. Hopefully sometime soon I'll be able to work out something that closely resembles a schedule.

I would like to thank everyone who reviewed the last few chapters, and thank you all again for waiting so long. Thank you for reading.

Cheers,

Madm05

Chapter Twenty Eight: Price

“Mum! Don’t you love me anymore? Mum please! Please Mum? Oh please oh please oh please oh *please!*”

Hermione watched as Ron hugged his mother’s left leg, begging shamelessly. *So much for being mature*, she thought with a sigh. Harry stood beside her, shaking his head, a small smile on his face. “This is getting to be embarrassing,” she said quietly. Harry said nothing, but his smile widened. If she were honest with herself, it was rather amusing.

“*Mum!*” Ron continued to wail.

“Of for heaven’s sake, Ronald, yes, you can stay the night if Headmaster Black agrees!”

Ron immediately launched himself at Sirius, latching on to the older man’s leg. “Oh please oh please oh please oh—”

“You can stay, Ron,” Sirius said, smirking. “It won’t be a problem.”

Mrs. Weasley sniffed. “Not wanting to spend Christmas Eve with his own family. I’m half ashamed.”

Remus waved his hand dismissively. “It’s perfectly alright, Mrs. Weasley. Ron just helped Santa deliver presents. I’m sure he’s still quite excited about it, and would like to talk with Harry and Hermione. It really isn’t a problem.”

Mrs. Weasley huffed but did not argue. “Well, I suppose I should get back to Arthur. Poor man, he’s watching the children all by himself and hasn’t the heart to make them stop their tricks. Come here, Ronald. Give me a hug and a kiss goodbye.”

“Mum!” Ron gasped, horrified. “No, not in front of my—” Mrs. Weasley pulled him to her kissed him before hugging him. They could hear Ron’s muffled groan from his place in his mother’s arms as Mrs. Weasley reminded him to be good, not keep Harry and Hermione up all night, respect the headmaster and his staff, take a bath and be sure to use the bathroom before going to sleep so he wouldn’t wet

the bed this time around. When she finally released him, Ron looked mortified.

Harry and Hermione glanced at each other and shared a wince. While Hermione couldn't personally say anything about Harry, Hermione clearly recalled the time her own mother had loudly reminded her that it *that time of the month* again, and that she needed to pick up more feminine supplies—while the neighbours were over for dinner. Hermione completely understood Ron's agony, and gave him a sympathetic look.

Ron walked over to them, his face frighteningly pale and his ears alarmingly red. Hermione briefly considered trying to comfort him, but knew that such words would fall on deaf ears. Anything she said would only embarrass him further. *Best to keep quiet, I think.*

Harry didn't share in her discretion. He snickered as his friend approached. Ron looked like he wanted to die on the spot.

Hermione leapt to his defence. "Don't feel bad, Ron. Just the other day Uncle Sirius had to give Harry another bath because Harry forgot to wash all of the soap out of his hair." Harry stopped laughing.

Hermione had found that making Harry see parallels between himself and others was the best way to deal with him. From what she understood of him, Tom Riddle refused to see the similarities between himself and others. If she could make Harry see himself as being part of a group, she was sure it would help keep him grounded.

"Well," Remus said as he knelt down next to them. "Are you boys ready to get a bath?"

"Hermione's a girl!" Ron gasped. "She's a girl, not a boy!"

Remus chuckled. "Indeed, she is a girl. Hermione likes to get her baths in the morning though, and Harry likes to get his in the evening. I thought it would be the same for you, Ron."

Ron seemed to think about it. "Hermione won't be there?"

"No, I won't," Hermione interrupted, intending to set his mind at ease. "I will be in my room, reading." She shook her head a little. Life would be so much easier if Ron could just get over his fear of girls. It was getting on her nerves.

Ron looked notably relieved. "That's good."

Remus smiled and continued. "We're going to let you boys sleep in Hermione's room tonight. We figured the three of you would want to stay up and talk for a bit and rather than having you sneaking around, we've decided to just let you stay together." His smile softened. "The cots we've set up have all been spelled to protect you from any... *stray... magic.*"

Harry and Ron didn't seem the least bit bothered by the idea of accidental magic, though, and merely nodded. With that, they went their separate ways. Hermione, clutching her hat and the cup within, left to change and get ready for bed, and the boys to get a bath. To her annoyance, there were several bathrooms in the house, so she wouldn't have to wait long before both of the boys were done, giving her less time to plan what to say.

She snuggled into her blankets and pulled out a book to read. *Hogwarts, A History* always warmed her heart and soothed her nerves. She stared at the words on the page, but was focused on what to say to Ron. Hermione wasn't sure how long she stared at the same page, but before she knew it, her door was opening and Harry and Ron walked in, lost in conversation.

"I heard Bill telling Charlie a joke in the summer, and I just remembered it," Ron was saying. "Do you want to hear it?"

"Sure," Harry said. "I like jokes."

"Okay," Ron nodded. "How many mice does it take to screw in a light bulb?" He asked.

"I don't know," Harry replied.

"Two. It's getting them inside the bulb that's the hard part," Ron said with a grin. The two boys burst out laughing. Hermione blushed

crimson and raised her book to cover her face. How did they know about *that*?

"I don't get it," Harry said after he calmed.

"Me neither," Ron replied breathlessly. "But Bill and Charlie thought it was the funniest thing in the world."

Hermione felt a bit of relief at that, and lowered her book. "Ron? Maybe you shouldn't tell any more jokes that you hear your brothers say, especially if you don't know what they mean."

"Why?" Ron asked. "Do you know what it means? Can you explain it to us?"

"Yeah," Harry said leaning towards her as if to hear what she might say. "Can you explain it to us? We don't get it."

Hermione felt that the room was much hotter than normal. She shifted uncomfortably, her face red. She was sure she hadn't been that red since that time she had accidentally picked up a romance novel. As it was, Hermione *really* didn't want to explain about two mice screwing in a light bulb to her two, very young, male friends. "I don't get it either," she murmured. "But," Hermione said in a stronger voice. "That doesn't mean you should go around saying it. What if it's a really bad joke? One that could get you into trouble?"

Harry gave her a look that clearly said he knew that she knew exactly what that joke meant, but that he was going to let it pass. He always seemed to know when she was lying, or when she wasn't telling the whole truth. It was times like this one that she desperately wished she had been able to find more information on betrothal bonds. Alas, she books had long since been removed from the Black family library, and she certainly couldn't ask Remus or Sirius, lest she raise suspicion.

Ron, meanwhile, looked terrified. "I'll never talk again," he said solemnly.

Harry snorted mirthfully. "I don't think you can go for forever without talking."

"I can so, just you watch me. I won't say another word," Ron said firmly. "Hey, can I have a chocolate frog?"

"I don't have any," Harry replied. "Besides we have stuff to talk about."

"Right," Ron agreed. "Like why you two went off like you did. What was that about?"

Hermione drew in a deep breath and launched into the story. "There's a man, Ron, named Voldemort. Have you ever heard of him?" It was a silly question, but one she felt compelled to ask.

Ron, surprisingly, shook his head. "No, I haven't. Who is the Voldemort guy?"

Hermione started. She had fully expected him to tremble in fear and back away. It dawned on her that Ron probably had only known Voldemort as You Know Who, and had never heard his fashioned name. "He's an evil wizard," she replied. "His name was Tom Riddle, but he changed it to Voldemort."

"Anyways, he was defeated a long time ago, but he broke his soul into pieces and put them into some things," she explained, hoping she had simplified the situation sufficiently. "Because of that, he can't be killed until those things are destroyed. This," she pulled the cup out of her hat, "is one of those things. I have three more, but Harry and I still need to get another one. After that, we can destroy them and finally beat him."

Ron nodded in understanding. "So this Voldemort guy can't die until we get rid of all of the pieces of his soul. But who is Voldemort? You never said."

"He's a coward," Harry said viciously. "He's the one who killed my mum and dad, and tried to kill me too."

Ron's face turned dramatically white. "Y-you mean you're talking about You Know Who? B-b-but I..."

“Ron,” Hermione interrupted softly. “If you say his name, you make him a man, and men can be killed. If you are so afraid of him that you refuse to say his name, you make him a god over you, and you can’t defeat a god.”

“And he’s a coward Ron,” Harry said, his voice tight, controlled. “He tried to kill me when I was a baby, so you know he’s not very brave.”

“And you said his name three times,” Hermione added. “I’m very proud of you. I bet none of your brothers have ever been brave enough to say his name.”

Their words seemed to soothe him. He was quiet for a long moment before he nodded sharply. “So what are we going to do about the last thing with his soul? We need to get it so we can beat V-Voldemort.” He flinched and looked around as if expecting him to appear as if saying his name would summon him.

Hermione leaned back, satisfied. “I know where it is, but I don’t know how we can get it. Plus Papa Remus and Uncle Sirius are really protective of us.”

“We’ll think of something,” Harry said before yawning. “I’m tired.”

“Me too,” Ron added, stretching. Hermione shook her head, inwardly admiring the ability of the young to bounce back from anything. She’d just told Ron that she and Harry were out to save the world, and he was ready to sleep.

“Let’s get some sleep then,” Hermione said. “We’ll figure it out later.” She paused. “Let’s not worry about it for now. It’s Christmas tomorrow.”

“Yeah,” Ron said sleepily, laying down and pulling the blankets up to his chin. “I’ll see you in th’mornin’...”

“Mmm,” Harry agreed as he wriggled under his blankets.

Hermione looked at them for a moment before laying back herself and drifting off to sleep.

A scuffling sound coming from outside her door woke her. Hermione remained still, half hoping she would go back to sleep. It was a peaceful night, with the Dark Harry behaving himself in her dreams. He was throwing some sort of party.

The scuffling sounded again, this time accompanied by voices. Her door opened silently, and in slipped Remus and Sirius. "Careful Moony, you're going to drop them."

"I wouldn't be having such a rough time if *someone* would give me a little help!"

"But you do so well on your own. Oh alright, hold on...there. Better?"

"Much. Now, get a move on, these things will be hatching any minute now."

Hermione frowned. Hatching? Oh dear. What were those two up to now?

"Any idea what they are Moony?"

"No idea. It's all Dumbledore's doing. He said this one here is a miracle. Apparently, he was supposed to visit an old friend this Christmas, but cut his visit short so he could help us again. I guess he got back to his office and found the egg. From what I understand, if he hadn't been there to keep it warm enough, the egg would have died."

"Really? What about the other two?"

"I told you, Padfoot, I have no idea. All I know is that whatever hatches will know who they belong to immediately. From what I understand it's some sort of spell that summons a Companion, you know, the perfect Familiar. That's why he needed those things from each of the kids, so it would be personal. Do you have the tags? The one saying they're from Santa?"

“Somewhere...” Sirius murmured. “Here they are. There. That looks pretty good. Now what do we do?”

Hermione could almost hear Remus shrug. “Wait for them to hatch I suppose.”

Silence.

“Hey, you want some pancakes? I’m hungry.” With that, the door shut and the scuffling resumed as the two men walked away.

Hermione sat up and looked first at the clock, noting that it was not even six in the morning. Shaking her head and questioning the two men’s sanity, she turned her attention to the gifts they had brought in. There, a few feet from her bed, was a basket filled with straw and three eggs.

Unable to stave off her curiosity, Hermione slipped out of her bed and made her way over to the basket. One of the eggs was very large and fragile looking. There were no marks to identify what animal it came from, to her disappointment. The next egg, much smaller, was speckled, but the pattern was not discernable. The final egg didn’t seem to be a real egg. It was large and looked more like a white sphere, bearing a faint glow.

It was this would - be egg that drew her attention. Hesitantly, she reached out and touched the smooth surface. Cracks radiated out from the place her fingers touched the shell. Hermione jerked her hand back, fearful of what she had done. She watched with baited breath as the cracks spread and a small paw poked through. Hermione sat, entranced, as first a golden paw broke through, followed by a human head, a golden shoulder, another paw...

“A sphinx,” she breathed. It made a whining sound as it struggled to make its way out of it’s cage. It was young, only just born, as far as she could tell. The sphere would have kept it safe, she knew. It opened its eyes and peered at her with watery blue eyes. Shaggy brown hair fell over it’s face and cocked it’s head to the side. “Are you a boy sphinx or a girl sphinx?” She wondered aloud. It puffed its chest out. “A boy sphinx then.” He nodded his head. Hermione smiled lightly and gently ran her fingers through his fur. He was small,

incredibly so when she considered how big a sphinx could grow. He fit nicely in the palm of her hand. "Are you mine?" She asked tentatively, still stroking him. He stretched and began to purr. "I'll take that as a yes." Hermione smiled a little. "What shall I call you, hm?"

"H'mione?" A voice murmured. "What're you doing?" Harry was sitting up in bed, rubbing his eyes. He reached over and grabbed his glasses. Looking at the sight before him he gasped. "Ron! Ron look what Hermione's got Ron! Wake up!"

"No Mum, m'sleepin'. Lemmelone." Ron rolled over.

"It's Christmas Ron, and there are eggs! We got eggs! And Hermione's got some cat with a human head!"

"Huh wah?" Ron jerked up. He stared at her for a long moment before rubbing his eyes and looking again. "Merlin! That's a sphinx!"

"Wow," Harry whispered in awe. He grinned. "Let's see what we got Ron!" Both boys all but tumbled out of their beds in their excitement. Ron was still tangled in his sheets and would have fallen flat on his face had he not caught himself with his magic. They took their seats beside her.

Ron looked between the eggs and almost dejectedly grabbed the smaller egg. "This one's probably mine," he said softly.

"Mine's opening," Harry said breathlessly as a crack appeared on the large, fragile surface. A beak emerged, accompanied by a head. Large, glowing orange eyes blinked and stared at Harry before shrieking. "Mine's stuck, I think." The creature struggled to get out of its egg and finally stood proudly before them, taking up most of Harry's lap. "It's a cat bird," Harry said.

Hermione wasn't listening. Her eyes were trained on a small mark on the creature's foot. She recognized it. In third year, when and the boys had been fighting, she had spent a lot of time with Hagrid and consequently with Buckbeak. She had noticed a small, hook - like mark on his left claw. A birth mark, Hagrid had said. The same mark was on the Hippogriff now sitting in Harry's lap. Harry's new pet was

Buckbeak, the very hippogriff that had saved their lives countless times.

"It's a hippogriff, Harry. You need to be careful, because they are very proud. You'll have to bow to him and things like that," Hermione told him. She paused. "I think he looks like a Buckbeak. Maybe that's what you should name him."

Harry looked at the hippogriff for a long moment before smiling. "Buckbeak. I like it. What about you, do you like it?" He asked the hippogriff. Buckbeak nodded his head regally before stretching his wings. "Wow," Harry murmured with another smile.

"Neat," Ron said, his voice strained and his smile forced. He was holding his own, much smaller egg carefully, but was looking longingly at Buckbeak, who was now preening. With a pang Hermione realized what he must be thinking as he compared his own gift with the sphinx and hippogriff she and Harry had received. She could only hope his gift was as wonderful as theirs.

The egg in his hand trembled slightly and then, just as the other two, cracked. A beak poked through, followed by a head of red feathers. Hermione gasped softly as she watched a beautiful red and gold bird slowly make its way out of the shell. "It's kind of..." Ron trailed off, his face the picture of confusion.

"Merlin, it's a phoenix," Hermione said quietly.

Ron's head snapped up. He looked between her and the bird now cradled in his hands with an awestruck expression. His lips twitched in uncertainty. "Hi," he said weakly. "I'm Ron."

"A phoenix, a real phoenix! That's brilliant Ron!" Harry said with a grin. He reached out to touch it, but the phoenix snapped at him. Harry jerked his hand back and frowned. "He's not very nice."

The phoenix squawked indignantly. "I think *he* is a *she*, Harry," Hermione said. The phoenix lifted her head regally. She seemed to sniff in disdain before turning back to Ron and cooing. "She's a feisty one, isn't she?"

"She is a fiery one, that's for sure," Ron grinned. His smile faded as he looked pensively at his new Familiar. "Fiery," he murmured. "Inflamare? No. Incendio... Incendia!" He grinned again. "How about that? Would you like to be Incendia?" The Phoenix made a sound that filled their hearts with warmth. "I'll take that as a yes."

"What about you, Hermione?" Harry asked. "What are you going to name yours?"

Hermione cocked her head to the side as she looked at the small, male sphinx sitting in her hands. "Zeno," she said finally. "I think I'll call him Zeno."

Ron wrinkled his nose. "What kind of a name is that? You always come up with these weird names for your animals."

"I don't know, I think they sound neat," Harry disagreed. "I like them."

"They're named for philosophers," Hermione replied. "Muggle philosophers, so you wouldn't have heard of them."

"Oh," Ron murmured. He looked back at Incendia and smiled warmly. Incendia's feathers had already dried, though she was still very tiny. She sang a single, pure note. "I'm hungry too." Ron looked up. "You two want to get something to eat? I'm starved!" Holding Incendia with one hand, Ron rubbed his stomach with the other.

Harry chuckled. "Yeah, let's go eat. I think Buckbeak is hungry as well." The hippogriff squawked his agreement. He stood up, cradling the creature in his arms. "Let's go."

"Yeah," Ron agreed heartily. Incendia perched on his shoulder as he rose. The two boys hurried out of the room. Only Harry looked back as he passed through the door, smiling softly as he went.

"Well, Zeno, I suppose we should join them, yes?" The sphinx looked up and yawned largely before nodding. Smiling, Hermione followed the boys, feeling better than she had in a long time.

It wasn't long before they walked into the kitchen, their dining area of choice when school was not in session. Sirius was sitting at the

kitchen table, a red Santa hat cocked jauntily on the side on his head, and Horace sitting in his lap. Sirius was loudly singing an off - key Christmas carol while Horace barked accompaniment. Remus was sitting beside him, smirking in amusement. Harmony sat in his lap, giggling madly as a tan coloured puffskein stuck it's tongue up her nose.

"Ho! Ho! *Huh?*" Sirius had caught sight of the magical creatures accompanying them in the middle of his Christmas greeting.

"I got a phoenix! I named her Incendia! She's a girl!" Ron cheered, grinning widely. "Do you have any pancakes?"

"I've got a Hippogriff," Harry fairly crowed. "Hermione said he looked like a Buckbeak, so that's what I named him. Isn't he great! I think he's going to be real big one day. Do you think I'll be able to fly on him?"

"Absolutely not! You could fall and break your neck!" Hermione replied as Sirius and Remus looked on in silence, Harmony still giggling, and Horace whining in an attempt to get more attention. Hermione turned back to everyone at the table. "This is Zeno," she calmly told them, introducing the sphinx as though it were an everyday occurrence.

"Zeno is the name of a fossil," Ron stated.

"Philosopher," Hermione corrected absently.

"Same thing," Ron shrugged.

Sirius and Remus remained quiet, looking between the phoenix and Harry before sharing a look between themselves. Hermione couldn't help but think that she'd met subtler Jarveys, but managed to refrain from rolling her eyes.

"Uh, about those pancakes..." Ron broke the silence, his voice unsteady.

"Oh! Of course! Sit down, sit down, all of you. You must be rather hungry," Remus said. "Tuck in, you lot."

“Thank you Mister Lupin,” Ron said as though Remus had just saved his life. “I’m so hungry I could eat a hippogriff!”

Buckbeak squawked and began to flap his wings angrily, snapping at Ron.

“What’s going on?” An airy voice asked. “Have the Skoffins come?”

Everyone turned to see Luna Lovegood standing in the doorway. Her nightclothes were interesting, to say the least. The shirt was a peculiar shade of lime green, covered in purple stars and orange crescent moons, while the bottoms were a soft grey with blue stripes down either side. Her socks were tan, but the toes were cut out, seemingly on purpose. Hermione supposed the odd ensemble was meant to ward off some mythical creature of which only Luna knew.

Sirius cleared his throat. “Kids, this is Luna. She’s going to be staying with us for a few days. Luna, this is Harry, Ron, and Hermione—”

“I know,” Luna interrupted softly. “Everyone knows, of course.” She cocked her head to the side as though listening to something. “Hmm.” She hummed a little before taking her seat at the table. “Please pass the toast, and do be mindful the Willibogs. Daddy says they like to hide in toast on holidays.”

Ron stared at her in a mix of confusion and distaste. “What are you doing here?”

Luna stiffened, her hand hovering over her cup of juice. Hermione didn’t know what was wrong, but knew she needed to do damage control. “What exactly are Willibogs, Luna?” She asked, just as Sirius opened his mouth.

Luna looked up, her eyes wide. “Willibogs are small creatures that hide in toast so that, when someone goes to eat, they can jump into their noses and take over their mind,” Luna replied solemnly. “They look like very tiny, featherless birds. You can only see them when you use a spell to help.”

“I see,” Hermione replied weakly. She looked over at Harry, who looked just as lost as she felt.

"You never said why you were here," Ron continued, frowning.

"Ron," Sirius began firmly. "That is none of your—"

"My mum died," Luna said quietly, her voice carrying nonetheless. Her wide eyes stared vacantly at the bacon on her plate. "And my daddy is away. The headmaster can't reach him. He will not get back until the day after tomorrow. He's searching for Klanslaws in the mountains."

Silence.

Hermione shook her head, staring at her plate, but seeing nothing. "But she wasn't supposed to, not yet," she murmured. "Not yet, not for another three years..." she trailed off as a weight settled her stomach and her chest tightened. *Too late*, she thought bitterly. *I was too late again. Can I do nothing right? I thought I had so much time. How did this happen?* She swayed dangerously in her seat. Distantly, she registered that Harry was holding her by the arm to keep her from falling.

"You knew?" Luna's voice snapped Hermione out of her daze. Luna's eyes, normally so wide and distant, were now narrowed and focused.

"No, no of course not. I... I don't feel well." She turned to Remus. "May I be excused?"

"Of course you may. Perhaps you should go lie down for a little while. We'll come get you later. If you're up to it, we can open gifts."

"Yes... yes thank you. That would be nice." Hermione nodded absently and stood before pushing her chair in and walking out of the kitchen. *Too late*. The words seemed to echo in her mind over and over. *Too late*.

"Hermione?"

Her head snapped up. Hermione looked around, realizing she had somehow walked to her room without knowing it. Looking towards the doorway, she saw Remus standing there, a concerned look on his face. Silently, he came forward and sat on her bed, waiting.

They sat, not speaking for several long moments. "Luna's mother wasn't supposed to die, not yet. She wasn't supposed to die until Luna was nine," Hermione said at last her shoulders drooping under the weight of Luna's loss. "I was... I was going to warn them." She sniffled. "I was going to save her but... but I was too late." Her voice broke. "Too late." She was unaware that she was crying until Remus wiped a tear away from her face and pulled her into his lap.

"Hermione," he began, his voice soft, gentle. "You know Harry's parents, James and Lily, died. For a long, long time I blamed myself for that. I always thought that, if I had been a better friend, if I... if I hadn't been a werewolf, they would have trusted me more and maybe they would be alive now. No," he stopped Hermione before she could argue. "Listen. Hermione, you can't blame yourself for things you cannot control. You can't blame yourself for not being able to save Luna's mother, just as I can no longer blame myself for not being able to save Lily and James." He kissed her gently on the forehead.

The two sat in silence once more. Hermione sighed, and felt some of the tension in her heart ease slightly. Logically, she knew he spoke the truth. Obviously, being able to send Luna to a school that would watch her allowed her mother the opportunity to experiment more, and so would have sped up the timeline in that respect. Logically.

But in her heart, she blamed herself for not anticipating this as a potential ending. She had tried so hard to take all possible outcomes into account, but she had never thought that, by changing the future, she would speed up the events of her own timeline.

"Sometimes," Remus was speaking again. "No matter how much we wish it was not so, some things simply cannot be avoided. I certainly wish that James and Lily hadn't died, that Sirius had never gone to prison, that Peter," he swallowed thickly. "That Peter had never betrayed us.

"But Hermione," he brushed a strand of hair away from her face. "Some things cannot be changed, and some things should not be changed. I've often wondered what would have happened if I could somehow send a message to my younger self, telling what would happen. Maybe I could have changed it, could have saved Lily and

James, but I would have paid a price for my second chance. Maybe, because I saved them, maybe Harry would have died in their stead.”

Hermione gasped softly. She couldn’t imagine a world without Harry.

Remus nodded. “Sometimes, Owlet, the price is worth paying, sometimes it is not. I would dearly love to change things, but not at the cost of Harry’s life. You need to remember that. Perhaps you could have saved Luna’s mother if you had said something sooner, but remember that something worse could have happened instead.”

He was silent as he held her. Hermione clenched her jaw. Something worse indeed. She had saved her dog at the cost of her parents. Yes, she understood all too well what he meant.

“You can’t dwell on what could have been, Hermione,” Remus said softly. “If you do, you will lose yourself.” He pulled back a little. “Now, what do you say we go celebrate Christmas?”

Hermione looked up at him for a moment before smiling weakly and pulling him into hug. He returned her embrace, offering her comfort. “Thanks, Dad.” She slid off his lap. “Let’s go.” Feeling better than she had in a long while, Hermione made her way to the door, Remus a few steps behind her. She never noticed the wide grin he bore.

Harry, Ron and Luna were waiting for her in the family room. Harmony was trying to climb on Horace’s back a few feet away. Ron at looked at her with a mix of awe and a little fear. Luna was unreadable. Harry was Harry— he was the calm she needed him to be. The four stood in silence.

“You’re a Seer?” Ron finally blurted, his ears as red as his hair.

Hermione grimaced and looked down, not wanting to look him in the eye as she lied. Fortunately, she did not have to lie. Luna came to her rescue. “Or maybe the Pholypines told her. That’s possible too.”

They were quiet for a moment before the four began to laugh. “Come on,” Harry said. “Let’s open our gifts. Ron’s mum will be here for him soon.”

On the other side of the room, Remus stood watching them next to Sirius, still smiling. “Why Moony, I don’t think I’ve ever seen you smile quite like that.” Sirius cocked his head to the side. “Care to share?”

“She called me Dad,” Remus told his friend.

Sirius smiled in reply. “That talk went well, I take it?”

Remus nodded. “It was... difficult, but yes, it went well. She feels so guilty, Padfoot, over things she can’t control. It’s like she’s trying to save everyone, or prevent some sort of disaster, but she doesn’t know how. I don’t know how to help her.” When Sirius didn’t respond, Remus looked over at his friend, who was watching Harry.

“I don’t really think we can help her, Moony. I think there is a lot going on that we don’t know about. It bothers me. Harry and Hermione have this...” he hesitated. “Connection. And then there’s Ron. He’s changed, lately. Seems more confident. They’re up to something, and I don’t know what.”

“What are going to do?” Remus asked.

“In the long run? We’ll think of something. For now? We’ll enjoy Christmas with our family.” In silent agreement, the two men walked towards the children.

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A/N: Well, **Fibinaci** called it—everything was going great so I went and pulled the rug out from under our trio. I must be getting predictable. Again, a thousand apologies for the delay, but college... well, I left a note in my profile about how hectic things have been of late. I’m not sure about the next update, only that you will not have to wait as long until the next chapter. I hope. Finding spare time to just write is not easy. I almost miss High School.

I did get it here by the third week, like I promised. Granted, it’s the tail end of the week, but here it is. I would have had this chapter out a few days ago, except I was having a lot of trouble with the scene with Luna at the breakfast table. And I mean a lot of trouble. I had to

rewrite it five times, and I'm still not satisfied with it. I think it feels rather forced.

Also, a few people have mentioned our favorite trio becoming animagi. It's idea I've been considering off and on for some time. It seems like fairly advanced magic for children to be learning. On the other hand, it is easier for children to learn than it is for adults. Since, it really won't have an impact on how the story plays out, I have decided to leave the decision to you. I will put a poll up in my profile shortly. You can cast your vote, and I'll close it...whenever I remember to close it.

Thanks to everyone who read, and special thanks to everyone who reviewed.

Cheers,

Madm05

